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THE WALL BETWEEN

By Sara Ware Bassett

THE TAMING OF ZENAS HENRY

THE WAYFARERS AT THE ANGEL'S

THE HARBOR ROAD

THE WALL BETWEEN

And now, by some miracle, here were the blossoms of Martin's raising. FRONTISPIECE. *See page 159.*

The Wall Between

BY

SARA WARE BASSETT

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY

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"Such are the miracles men call lives."

— *Edward Rowland Sill.*

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THE WALL BETWEEN

CHAPTER I

A MODERN RICHELIEU

THE Howe and Webster farms adjoined, lying on a sun-flooded, gently sloping New Hampshire hillside. Between them loomed The Wall. It was not a high wall. On the contrary, its formidableness was the result of tradition rather than of fact. For more than a century it had been an estranging barrier to neighborliness, to courtesy, to broad-mindedness; a barrier to friendship, to Christian charity, to peace.

The builder of the rambling line of gray stone had long since passed away, and had he not acquired a warped importance with the years, his memory would doubtless have perished with him. All unwittingly, alas, he had become a celebrity. His was the fame of omission, however, rather than of commission. Had he, like artist or sculptor, but affixed his

signature to his handiwork, then might he have sunk serenely into oblivion, "unwept, unhonored, and unsung." But unfortunately he was a modest creature. Instead, he had stepped nameless into the silence of the Hereafter, leaving to those who came after him not only the sinister boundary his hands had reared, but also a feud that had seethed hotly for generations.

If within the narrow confines of his last resting place he had ever been conscious of the dissension for which he was responsible and had been haunted by a desire to utter the magic word he had neglected to speak in life, he at least gave no sign. His lips remained sealed in death, and his spirit was never seen to walk abroad. Possibly he retired into his shroud with this finality because he never found it imperative, as did Hamlet's ghost, to admonish posterity to remember him.

Only too well was he remembered!

The Howes and Websters who followed him hurled against the sounding board of heaven the repeated questions of who built the wall, and whose duty was it to repair it. Great-grandfather Jabez Howe quibbled with Great-grandfather Abiatha Webster for a lifetime,

and both went down into the tomb still quibbling over the enigma. Afterward Grandfather Nathan Howe and Grandfather Ebenezer Webster took up the dispute, and they, too, were gathered into the Beyond without ever reaching a conclusion. Their children then wrangled and argued and slandered one another, and, like their forbears, retired from the field in impotent rage, leaving the combat a draw.

In the meantime the outlines of the ancient landmark became less clear-cut. Rocks toppled from its summit; yawning gaps marred its sharp edges; and at its base vines and growing things began to creep defiantly in and out the widening fissures that rent its foundation. Almost imperceptibly year by year dissolution went on, the crude structure melting into picturesqueness and taking on the gentle charm of a ruin until Martin Howe and Ellen Webster, its present-day guardians, beheld it an ignominious heap of stone that lay crumbling amid woodbine and clematis.

Far more beautiful was it in this half-concealed dilapidation than ever it had been in the pride of its perfection. Then it had stood boldly out against the landscape, naked and

aggressive; to-day, clothed in Nature's soft greenery, it had become so dim a heritage that it might easily have receded into the past and been forgotten had not the discord of which it had become the symbol been wilfully fanned into flame.

As in a bygone age one runner passed a lighted torch on to another, so did one generation of Howes and Websters bequeath to the next the embers of a wrath that never died. Each faction disclaimed all responsibility for the wall, and each refused to lay hand to it.

Adamantine as was the lichen-covered heap of granite, it was of far more mutable a quality than were the dispositions of those who had so stubbornly let it fall into decay. Time's hand had softened the harsh stone into mellow beauty; but the flintlike characters of the Howes and Websters remained uncompromising as of yore.

And now that Martin Howe and Ellen Webster reigned in their respective homesteads, neither one of them was any more graciously inclined toward raising the fallen boundary to its pristine glory than had been their progenitors. But for their obstinacy

they might have agreed to dispense with the wall altogether, since long ago it had become merely an empty emblem of restriction, and without recourse to it each knew beyond question where the dividing line between the estates ran; moreover, as both families shunned the other's land as if it were plague-ridden territory there was scant temptation for them to invade each other's domains. But the man and the woman had inherited too much of the blood of the original stock to consider entering into an armistice.

They had, it is true, bettered their predecessors to the extent of exchanging a stilted greeting when they met; but this perfunctory salutation was usually hurtled across the historic borderline and was seldom concluded without some reference to it. For Ellen Webster was an aggravating old woman dowered with just enough of the harpy never to be able to leave her antagonist in peace if she saw him at work in his garden.

"Mornin', Martin," she would call.

"Good mornin', Miss Webster."

"So you're plowin' up a new strip of land."

"Yes, marm."

"I s'pose you know it would save you a deal

of cartin' if you was to use the stones you're gettin' out to fix up your wall."

Then the hector would watch the brick-red color steal slowly from the man's cheek up to his forehead.

To pile the stones on the heap so near at hand would, he recognized, have saved both time and trouble; nevertheless, he would have worked until he dropped in his tracks rather than have yielded to the temptation.

His wall, indeed! The impudence of the vixen!

Angry in every fiber of his body, he would therefore wheel upon his tormentor and flash out:

"When you see me tinkerin' your tumble-down wall, Miss Ellen Webster, I'll be some older than I am now. I've work enough of my own to do without takin' in repairs for my neighbors."

At that he would hear a malicious chuckle.

For some such response Ellen always waited. She liked to see the fire of rage burn itself through Martin's tan and feel that she had the power to kindle it. He never disappointed her. Sometimes, to be sure, she had to prod him more than once, but eventually his retort,

sharp as the sting of an insect, was certain to come. From it she derived a half-humorous, half-vindictive satisfaction, for she was a keen student of human nature, and no one knew better than she that after the cutting words had left his lips proud-spirited young Martin scorned himself for having been goaded into uttering them.

A tantalizing creature, Ellen Webster!

Silent, penurious, shrewd to the margin of dishonesty; unrelenting as the rock-fronted fastnesses of her native hills; good-humored at times and even possessed of swift moods of tenderness that disarmed and appealed—such she was. She stood straight as a spruce despite the burden of her years, and a suggestion of girlhood's bloom still colored her cheek; but the features of her crafty countenance were tightly drawn; the blue eyes glinted with metallic light; and the mouth was saved from cruelty only by its upward curve of humor.

She had been an only daughter who since her teens had nursed invalid parents until death had claimed them and left her mistress of the homestead where she now lived. There had, it is true, been a boy; but in his early youth he had shaken the New Hampshire dust from off

his feet and gone West, from which Utopia he had for a time sent home to his sister occasional and peculiarly inappropriate gifts of Mexican saddles, sombreros, leggings, and Indian blankets. He had received but scant gratitude, however, for these well-intentioned offerings. It had always been against the traditions of the Websters to spend money freely and Ellen, a Webster to the core, resented his lack of prudence; furthermore the articles were useless and cluttered up the house. Possibly the more open-handed Thomas understood the implied rebuke in the meager thanks awarded him and was hurt by it; at any rate, he ceased sending home presents, and by and by Ellen lost trace of him altogether. Years of silence, unbroken by tidings of any sort, followed. Ellen had almost forgotten she had a brother when one day a letter arrived announcing his death.

The event brought to the sister no grief, for years ago Thomas had passed out of her life. Nevertheless the message left behind it an aftermath of grim realizations that stirred her to contemplate the future from quite a new angle. She had never before considered herself old. Now she suddenly paused and reflected

upon her seventy-five years and the uncertainty of the stretch of days before her.

Through the window she could see her prosperous lands, her garden upon the southern slope of the hill where warm sun kissed into life its lushly growing things; her pasture pierced by jagged rocks, and cattle-trampled stretches of rough turf; her wood lot where straight young pines and oak saplings lifted their reaching crests toward the sky; her orchard, the index of her progenitor's foresight. All these had belonged to the Websters for six generations, and she could not picture them the property of any one bearing another name; nor could she endure the thought of the wall being sometime rebuilt by an outsider.

What was to be the fate of her possessions after she was gone? Suppose a stranger purchased the estate. Or, worse than all, suppose that after she was dead Martin Howe was to buy it in. The Howes had always wanted more land.

Imagine Martin Howe plowing up the rich loam of her fields, invading with his axe the dim silences of her wood lot, enjoying the fruit of her orchard, driving his herds into her pasture! Fancy his feet grating upon the thresh-

old of her home, his tread vibrating on her stairways! The irony of it!

Martin was young. At least, he was not old. He could not be more than forty. He might marry sometime. Many a man more unapproachable even than Martin Howe did marry.

And if he should marry, what would be more likely than that he would give to his maiden sisters—Mary, Eliza, and Jane—the Howe farm and take for his own abode the more spacious homestead of the Websters?

Ellen's brows contracted fiercely; then her mouth twisted into a crooked smile.

What a retribution if, after all, it should be Martin whose fate it was to rebuild the wall! Why, such a revenge would almost compensate for the property falling into his hands! Suppose it should become his lot to cut away the vines and underbrush; haul hither the great stones and hoist them into place! And if while he toiled at the hateful task and beads of sweat rolled from his forehead, a sympathetic and indulgent Providence would but permit her to come back to earth and, standing at his elbow, jeer at him while he did it! Ah, that would be revenge indeed!

Then the mocking light suddenly died from the old woman's eyes. Maybe Martin would not buy the farm, after all.

Or if he did, he might perhaps leave the wall to crumble into extinction, so that the rancor and bitterness of the Howes and Websters would come to an end, and the enmity of a hundred years be wasted!

Would not such an inglorious termination of the feud go down to history as a capitulation of the Websters? Why, the broil had become famous throughout the State. For decades it had been a topic of gossip and speculation until the Howe and Webster obstinacy had become a byword, almost an adage. To have the whole matter peter out now would be ignominious.

No. Though worms destroyed her mortal body, the hostility bred between the families should not cease. Nor should her ancestral home ever become the prey of her enemies, either.

Rising decisively, Ellen took from the mahogany secretary the letter she had received a few days before from Thomas's daughter and reread it meditatively.

Twice she scanned its pages. Then she let

it drop into her lap. Again her eyes wandered to the stretch of land outside across which slanted the afternoon shadows.

The day was very still. Up from the tangle of brakes in the pasture came the lowing of cattle. A faint sweetness from budding apple trees filled the room. Radiating, narrowing away toward the sky line, row after row of low green shoots barred the brown earth of the hillside with the promise of coming harvest. It was a goodly sight,—that plowed land with its lines of upspringing seeds. A goodly sight, too, were the broad mowings stirring gently with the sweep of the western breeze.

Ellen regarded the panorama before her musingly. Then she seated herself at the old desk and with deliberation began to write a reply to her brother's child.

She was old, she wrote, and her health was failing; at any time she might find herself helpless and ill. There was no one to care for her or bear her company. If Luey would come to Sefton Falls and live, her aunt would be glad to give her a home.

"As yet," concluded the diplomat, with a Machiavelian stroke of the pen, "I have made no will; but I suppose I shall not be able to

take the Webster lands and money with me into the next world. You are my only relative. Think well before making your decision."

After she had signed and blotted the terse missive, Ellen perused its lines, and her sharp eyes twinkled. It was a good letter, a capital letter! Without actually promising anything, it was heavy with insidious bribery.

Be the girl of whatsoever type she might, some facet of the note could not fail to lure her hither. If a loyal Webster, family obligation would be the bait; if conscientious, plain duty stared her in the face; if mercenary, dreams of an inherited fortune would tempt her. The trap was inescapable.

In the meantime to grant a home to her orphan flesh and blood would appeal to the outside world as an act of Christian charity, and at the same time would save hiring the help she had for some time feared she would be driven to secure,—a fact that did not escape the woman's cunning mind.

She was not so strong as formerly, and of late the toil of the farm taxed her endurance. There was milking, sewing, the housework, and the care of the chickens; enough to keep ten

pairs of hands busy, let alone one. Oh, Lucy should earn her board, never fear!

As nearly as the aunt could calculate, her niece must now be about twenty years old,—a fine, vigorous age! Doubtless, too, the girl was of buxom Western build, for although Thomas had not married until late in life, his wife had been a youthful woman of the mining country. This Lucy was probably a strapping lass, who in exchange for her three meals would turn off a generous day's work. Viewed from every standpoint the scheme was an inspiration.

Ellen hoped it would not fail. Now that she had made up her mind to carry through the plan, she could not brook the possibility of being thwarted.

Once more she took the letter from its envelope and read it. Yes, it was excellent. Were she to write it all over again she could not improve it. Therefore she affixed the stamp and address and, summoning Tony, the Portuguese lad who slaved for her, she sent him to the village to mail it.

For two weeks she awaited an answer, visiting the post office each day with a greater degree of interest than she had exhibited to-

ward any outside event for a long stretch of years.

Her contact with the world was slight and infrequent. Now and then she was obliged to harness up and drive to the village for provisions; to have the horse shod; or to sell her garden truck; but she never went unless forced to do so. A hermit by nature, she had no friends and wanted none.

Her only neighbors were the Howes, and beyond the impish pleasure she derived from taunting Martin, they had no interest for her. The sisters were timid, inoffensive beings enough; but had they been three times as inoffensive they were nevertheless Howes; moreover, Ellen did not care for docile people. She was a fighter herself and loved a fighter. That was the reason she had always cherished a covert admiration for Martin. His temper appealed to her; so did his fearlessness and his mulish attitude toward the wall. Such qualities she understood. But with these cringing sisters of his who allowed him to tyrannize over them she had nothing in common. Had she not seen them times without number watch him out of sight and then leap to air his blankets, beat his coat, or perform some service they

dared not enact in his presence? Bah! Thank Heaven she was afraid of nobody and was independent of her fellow men.

Save for the assistance of the hard-worked Tony whom she paid—paid sparingly she confessed, but nevertheless *paid*—she attended to her own plowing, planting, and harvesting, and was beholden to nobody. The world was her natural enemy. To outwit it; to beat it at a bargain; to conquer where it sought to oppress her; to keep its whining dogs of pain, poverty, and loneliness ever at bay; to live without obligation to it; and die undaunted at leaving it,—this was her ambition.

The note she had mailed to her niece was the first advance she had made toward any human being within her memory; and this was not the cry of a dependent but rather the first link in a plot to outgeneral circumstances and place the future within her own control. She prided herself that for half a century she had invariably got the better of whosoever and whatsoever she had come in contact with. What was death, then, but an incident, if after it she might still reign and project her will into the universe even from the estranging fastnesses of the grave?

Therefore the answer from Lucy was of greater import than was any ordinary letter. It would tell her whether the initial step in her conspiracy to triumph over Destiny was successful. What wonder that her aged fingers trembled as she tore open the envelope of the message and spread the snowy paper feverishly on the table?

Summit, Arizona,
May 5, 1917.

Dear Aunt Ellen:

I can't tell you what a surprise it was to hear from you, and how much greater a surprise it was to have you ask me to come and live with you.

I had decided to go abroad and do Red Cross work, and was about to accept a position that had been offered me when your letter arrived. ("Humph!" murmured Ellen.)

But you write that you are alone in the world and not very well, and this being the case, I feel my place is with you.

You are my only relative, and I should be a very poor-spirited Webster indeed did I not acknowledge that your claim comes before any other. Therefore I shall be glad to come to New Hampshire and avail myself of your hospitality. I presume you have found, as I have, that living entirely for one's self is not very satisfactory after all. Since my father's death

I have had no one to look after and have felt lonely, useless, and selfish in consequence.

I am certain that in attempting to make you happy, I shall find happiness myself, and I assure you that I will do all I can to be helpful.

If all goes well I should arrive at Sefton Falls in about ten days. In the meantime, I send my warmest thanks for your kindness and the affectionate greetings of

Your niece,
Lucy Harmon Webster.

After she had finished reading the letter, Ellen sat tapping her foot impatiently upon the floor. She was nettled, angry.

She did not at all relish having this child turn the tables on her charity and make of it a favor. As for the girl's sentimental nonsense about its not being satisfactory to live alone, what was she talking about? Living alone was the most satisfactory thing in the world. Did it not banish all the friction of opposing wills and make of one a monarch? No, she did not like the letter, did not like it.

If this Lucy were sincere, she showed herself to be of that affectionate, conscientious, emotional type Ellen so cordially detested; besides, she held her head too high. If on the other hand, she were shamming, and were in

reality endowed with a measure of the Howe shrewdness, that was another matter.

Her aunt laughed indulgently at the girl's youthful attempt at subterfuge. She hoped she was humbugging. Worldly wisdom was an admirable trait. Had not the Websters always been famed for their business sagacity? She would far rather find Thomas's daughter blessed with a head than with a heart.

But the letter proved that the child was still a novice at the wiles of the world, dissemble as she would.

Had she been older and more discerning, she would have realized she had not actually been promised anything, and she would not have been decoyed into journeying hundreds of miles from home to pursue the wraith of an ephemeral fortune.

CHAPTER II

THE HOWES

WITHIN the confines of his own home Martin Howe, as Ellen Webster asserted, was a czar. Born with the genius to rule, he would probably have fought his way to supremacy had struggle been necessary. As it was, however, no effort was demanded of him, for by the common consent of an adoring family, he had been voluntarily elevated to throne and scepter. He was the only boy, the coveted gift long denied parents blessed with three daughters and in despair of ever possessing a son.

What rejoicings heralded his advent! Had half the treasures an eager father and mother prayed Heaven to grant been bestowed upon the child, he would unquestionably have become an abnormality of health, wealth, and wisdom. But Destiny was too farseeing a goddess to allow her neophyte to be spoiled by prosperity. Both his parents died while Mar-

tin was still a pupil at the district school, and the lad, instead of going to the city and pursuing a profession, as had been his ambition, found himself hurried, all unequipped, uneducated and unprepared, into the responsibilities of managing the family household.

Farming was not the calling he would have chosen. He neither liked it, nor was he endowed with that intuitive sixth sense on which so many farmers rely for guidance amid the mazes of plowing and planting. By nature, he was a student. The help he had sporadically given his father had always been given rebelliously and been accompanied by the mental resolve that the first moment escape was possible, he would leave the country and its nagging round of drudgery and take up a broader and more satisfying career.

To quote Martin's own vernacular, farming was hard work,—*damned hard work*. It was not, however, the amount of toil it involved that daunted him, but its quality. He had always felt a hearty and only thinly veiled contempt for manual labor; moreover, he considered life in a small village an extremely provincial one.

It was just when he was balancing in his mind the relative advantages of becoming a

CENTRAL

doctor or a lawyer, and speculating as to which of these professions appealed the more keenly to his fancy, that Fate intervened and relieved him of the onerousness of choosing between them.

Martin could have viewed almost any other vocation than that of farmer through a mist of romance, for he was young, and for him, behind the tantalizingly veiled future, there still moved the shadowy forms of knights, dragons, and fair ladies; but with the grim eye of a realist, he saw farming as it was, stripped of every shred of poetry. Blossoming orchards and thriving crops he knew to be the ephemeral phantasms of the dreamer. Farming as he had experienced it was an eternal combat against adverse conditions; a battle against pests, frosts, soil, weather, and weariness. The conflict never ceased, nor was there hope of emerging from its sordidness into the high places where were breathing space and vision. One could never hope when night came to glance back over the day and see in retrospect a finished piece of work. There was no such thing as writing *finis* beneath any chapter of the ponderous tome of muscle-racking labor.

The farmer stopped work at twilight only

because his strength was spent and daylight was gone. The aching back, the tired muscles, could do no more, and merciful darkness drew a curtain over the day, thereby cutting off further opportunity for toil until the rising of another sun.

But although night carried with it temporary relief from exertion, it brought with it little peace. As one sat at the fireside in the gathering dusk, it was only to see in imagination a sinister procession of specters file past. They were the things that had been left undone. On they swept, one unperformed task treading upon the heel of its predecessor. There still remained potatoes to spade, weeds to pull, corn to hoe. A menacing company of ghosts to harass a weary man as his eyes closed at night and confront him when he opened them in the morning!

And even when, with the zest the new day brought, he contrived to mow down the vanguard of the parade, other recruits were constantly reënforcing its rear ranks and swelling the foes arraigned against the baffled farmer. Struggle as he would, the line was sometimes longer at evening than it had been at dawn. What wonder that a conscientious fellow like

Martin Howe felt farming less a business to be accomplished than a choice of alternatives? What rest was there in sleep, if all the time one's eyes were closed a man was subconsciously aware that cutworms were devouring his lettuce and that weeds were every instant gaining headway? Even the rhythm of the rain was a reminder that the pea vines were being battered down and that the barn roof was leaking.

Yet to flee from this uncongenial future and seek one more to his liking did not occur to Martin Howe. He had been born with an uncompromising sense of duty, and once convinced of an obligation, he would have scorned to shirk it. The death of his parents left him no choice but to take up his cross with New England Spartanism and bear it like a true disciple. All the Howe capital was invested in land, in stock, and in agricultural implements. To sell out, even were he so fortunate as to find a purchaser, would mean shrinkage. And the farm once disposed of, what then? Had he been alone in the world, he would not have paused to ask the question. But there were Mary, Eliza, and Jane,—three sisters older than himself with no resources for earn-

ing a living. Even he himself was unskilled, and should he migrate to the city, he would be forced to subsist more or less by his wits; and to add to his uncertain fortunes the burden of three dependent women would be madness. No, the management of the family homestead was his inevitable lot. That he recognized.

What the abandonment of his "Castles in Spain" cost Martin only those who knew him best appreciated; and they but dimly surmised. Resolutely he kept his face set before him, allowing himself no backward glances into the *dolce-far-niente* land left behind. As it was characteristic of him to approach any problem from the scholar's standpoint, he attacked his agricultural puzzles from a far more scientific angle than his father had done, bringing to them an intelligence that often compensated for experience and opened before him vistas of surprising interest. He subscribed to garden magazines; studied into crop rotation and the grafting of trees and vines; spent a few months at college experimenting with soils and chemicals. He investigated in up-to-date farming machinery and bought some of the devices he felt would economize labor.

Gradually the problem of wresting a living

from the soil broadened and deepened until it assumed alluring proportions. Farming became a conundrum worthy of the best brain, and one at which the supercilious could ill afford to scoff. Martin found himself giving to it the full strength both of his body and mind.

By the end of the first year he had become resigned to his new career; by the end of the second interested in it; by the end of the third enthusiastic.

In the meantime, as season succeeded season, the soil he had so patiently tended began to give him thanks, returning ever increasing harvests. The trees in the old orchard bent under their weight of apples; the grapevines were lush with fruit. The Howe farm acquired fame in the neighborhood.

The boy was proud of his success and justly so. Not alone did it represent man's triumph over Nature, but it also meant the mastery of Martin's own will over his inclinations. And all the while that he was achieving this dual victory he was developing from a thin, overgrown lad into a muscular young giant,—keen-eyed, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, strong-armed. He was lithe as an Indian and almost as unwearying. If through the cross rifts of

his daily routine there filtered occasional shadows of loneliness, he only vaguely acknowledged their existence, attributing his groping longing for sympathy to the lack of male companionship and the uncongeniality that existed between himself and his sisters.

He had, to be sure, a few masculine acquaintances in the village, but most of them were older and less progressive than he, and they offered him little aid in his difficulties. Having farmed all their lives and been content with the meager results they had obtained, they shrugged their shoulders at Martin's experiments with irrigation and fertilizer, regarding his attempts as the impractical theories of a fanatic. Of youth, Sefton Falls contained only a scattering, the more enterprising young men having gone either to the city or to the War.

Thus bereft of friends of his own sex, and turned back from a professional or a soldier's career by Duty's flaming sword, Martin reverted to his own home for comradeship. But here, alas, he was again disappointed.

Mary, Eliza, and Jane were not of a type to fill the void in his life that he sought to have filled. It would be unfair to say he had not

a warm regard for his sisters, for he was a person of inherent loyalty, and ties of blood meant much to him. Had he not sacrificed his own dreams that his family might retain their old home? Nevertheless one may have a deep-rooted affection for one's kin and yet not find them congenial; and Martin was compelled to acknowledge that Mary, Eliza and Jane—estimable women as they were—had many fundamental characteristics that were quite out of harmony with his ideals of life. It was possible their faults were peculiar to the entire feminine race. He was not prepared to say, since his knowledge of the sex had never extended beyond the sill of his own doorway. But whether general or particular, the truth remained that the mental horizon of his sisters, bounded as it was by the four walls of the kitchen and such portion of the outside world as could be seen from its windows, was pitiably narrow.

Beyond the round of their daily duties none of the three women had an interest in life. Over and over again they performed their humdrum tasks in the same humdrum fashion, arguing over each petty detail of the time-worn theme until he marveled they could re-

tain a particle of zest for routine they never varied from year to year.

Reading and experimenting brought a freshness to his work that stimulated detours into untraveled paths. But Mary, Eliza, and Jane never sought out the uncharted way. Evidently monotony suited their stolid temperaments; or if it did not, they never rebelled against it or tried to shake off its fetters. Matter-of-fact, timid, faithful, capable, middle-aged,—they were born to be plodders rather than explorers.

Martin admitted that to their undeviating system he owed a great measure of the comfort and tranquillity of his well-ordered house, and hence he struggled earnestly not to complain at the bondage that resulted from their cast-iron methods. Long since he had despaired of expecting adaptability from them. They must cling to their rut or all was *lost*. Once out of their customary channel, and they were like tossing ships, rudderless and without an anchor.

Their solicitude for him was another source of exasperation. There were days when the brute in him rose and clamored to strike Mary for tagging at his heels with coats and medi-

cines, and Eliza for her lynxlike observation of every mouthful he ate. But he curbed the impulse, shamefacedly confessing himself to be ungrateful.

Had his tolerance been reënforced by insight, he would have understood that the very qualities which so exasperated him sprang from his sister's laudable desire to voice a gratitude they could not put into words by neglecting no act which would promote his welfare; but Martin, alas, was not a psychologist, and therefore was unable to translate his annoyances in these interpretative terms.

In truth, what Mary, Eliza, and Jane were as individuals concerned him very little. He always thought of them as a composite personality, a sort of female trinity.

Nevertheless Mary, Eliza, and Jane Howe were not a trinity. They were three very distinct beings.

Mary had had spinsterhood thrust upon her. At heart she was a mother, a woman created to nurse and comfort. Her greatest happiness was derived from fluttering about those she loved and waiting upon them. Had she dared, she would have babied Martin to an even greater extent than she did. As it was, when

she was not at his elbow with warmer socks, heavier shoes, or a cup of hot coffee, she was worrying about Mary and Eliza, brewing tonics for them, or putting burning soapstones in their beds. It was a pity Life had cheated her of having a dozen babies to pilot through the mazes of measles and whooping cough, for then Mary would have been in her element. Yet nature is a thing of inconsistencies, and through some strange, unaccountable caprice, Mary's marital instincts stopped with this fostering instinct. In every other respect she was an old maid. Men she abhorred. Like Jennie Wren, she knew their tricks and their manners—or thought she did—which for all practical purposes amounted to the same thing. Had it been necessary for her to prove some of the theorems she advanced concerning the male sex, she would have been at a loss to do so, since the scope of her experience was very limited. Nevertheless, with genuine Howe tenacity, she clung to her tenets even though she was without data to back them up.

Eliza, on the other hand, had in her girlhood been the recipient of certain vague attentions from an up-State farmer, and these had bared to her virgin imagination a new world. True,

the inconstant swain had betaken himself to the next county and there wed another. But although the affair had come to this ignominious end and its radiance had been dimmed by the realities of a quarter of a century of prosaic life, Eliza had never allowed time to obscure entirely the beauty of that early dream, nor the door thus opened into the fairy realms of romance to be wholly closed. Though she knew herself to be old, silver-haired, and worn, yet within the fastnesses of her soul she was still young and waited the coming of her lover. The illusion was only an illusion—a foolish, empty fantasy. However, it helped her to be content with the present and harmed no one. That Eliza had never quite "quit struggling" was borne out by the ripples into which she coaxed her hair and by the knot of bright ribbon she never failed to fasten beneath her ample chin.

Of the trio, Jane was the best balanced. Although the youngest of the sisters, it was to her judgment they were wont to appeal in times of stress. She was more fearless, more outspoken; and any mission she undertook was more certain of success. Therefore, when it became necessary to present some cause to

Martin, it always fell to Jane's lot to act as spokesman. Once when a controversy concerning Ellen Webster had arisen, Jane had actually had the temerity to denounce her brother's attitude to his face, declaring that should the old woman fall ill she would certainly go and take care of her. Martin had met her defiance with rage. The Websters and all their kindred might die before he would cross their threshold or allow any of his family to do so. Before the violence of his wrath, Mary and Eliza, who within their souls agreed with Jane, quailed in terror; but Jane was undaunted.

This lack of what Martin termed *proper pride* in his sisters was a source of great disgust to him. He was quite conscious that although they did not openly combat his opinions, they did not agree with him, and not only regretted being at odds with their neighbors but also condemned his perpetuation of the old feud as unchristian. Hence it was a cause for much rejoicing to his mind to reflect that one male Howe at least survived to bolster up a spineless, spiritless, and decadent generation. To love one's enemies was a weak creed. Martin neither loved them nor pretended to.

Never, never, would he forgive the insults the Websters had heaped upon his family. He wished no positive harm to Ellen Webster; but he certainly wished her no good.

Mary, Eliza, and Jane had too much timidity and too great a craving for peace not to conform outwardly at least to their brother's wishes. Accordingly they bent their necks to his will; for did not Martin rule the house?

Had you inquired of any of the sisters the Howes' breakfast hour, you would have been told that breakfast was served when Martin pleased. It was the sound of his step upon the stair that set preparations for the morning meal in motion. So it was with every other detail of the home. When he appeared in the doorway his handmaidens sprang to serve him, and so long as he lingered beneath the roof they stayed their impatient hands from any task that would create noise or confusion, and disturb his tranquillity. It was not until the ban of his presence was removed that they ventured to resume the mopping, dusting, or cooking in which they had been engaged before his entrance.

It would have been interesting to know how

Martin explained to himself the lack of machinery in his household, and how he reconciled the spotlessness of his home with the apparent idleness of his sisters. His hearth was always swept; the dishes noiselessly washed; the beds made as if by magic; and the cleaning done without shadow of inconvenience to him. So long as these processes were not forced upon his consciousness and were faultlessly performed, he accepted the results without comment. But let one cog of the wheel slip, setting the mechanism of his comfort awry, and he was sure to mention it.

Possibly it was because he himself performed his out-of-door duties well that he demanded, and felt he had the right to demand a similar perfection within doors. In fact, he drew the lines of demarkation between the masculine and feminine spheres of service so sharply that his sisters would have died before they would have asked his aid in any domestic difficulty. Faithfully he met every obligation he considered to be within a man's province,—bringing wood, coal, and kindlings with the courtesy of a courtier; but the fowl browning in the oven might have burned to ebony before Martin would have lifted a finger to rescue it. To

oversee the cooking was not his duty. No autocrat ever reigned with more absolute power than did Martin Howe; and no monarch ever maintained a more sincere faith in his divine right to rule. He simply set the crown of sovereignty upon his own brows because he believed it to belong there. And had his faith in his destiny wavered, there were always his slaves Mary, Eliza, and Jane to bow their foreheads in the dust at his feet and murmur with true Oriental submissiveness:

Oh, King, Live Forever!

His lordship being thus acknowledged, was it any wonder that Martin cast about himself a mantle of aloofness and dignity and rated as trivial the household routine and petty gossip of his sisters? When he listened to their chatter at all it was with the tolerance of a superior being toward a less intelligent rabble.

Hence when he returned from the field one night and was greeted by the breathless announcement that a strange young woman with her trunk had just arrived at the Websters', it was characteristic of him to quiet the excited

outburst of his sisters with the chilling and stately reply:

"What does it matter to us who she is, or what she's come for? Ellen Webster's visitors are no concern of ours."

CHAPTER III

LUCY

In the meantime the being whom Martin had dismissed with this majestic wave of his hand stood in the middle of the Webster kitchen, confronting the critical eyes of its mistress.

"Yes, Aunt Ellen," the girl was saying, catching the elder woman's stiff fingers in hers, "I'm Lucy. Do you think I look like Dad? And am I at all what you expected?"

Ellen drew her hands uncomfortably from the impulsive grasp but did not reply immediately. She was far too bewildered to do so.

Lucy was not in the least what she had expected,—that was certain. In the delicate oval face there was no trace of Thomas's heavily modeled features; nor was Lucy indebted to the Websters for her aureole of golden hair, the purity of her blond skin, or her grave brown eyes. Thomas had been a massively formed, kindly, plain-featured man; but his daughter was beautiful. Even Ellen, who

habitually scoffed at all that was fair and banished the æsthetic world as far from her horizon as possible, was forced to acknowledge this.

In the proudly poised head, the small, swiftly moving hands, and the tiny feet there was a birdlike alertness which was the epitome of action. The supple body, however, lacked the bird's fluttering uncertainty; rather the figure bespoke a control that had its birth in an absence of all self-consciousness and the obedience of perfectly trained muscles to a compelling will.

Without a shadow of embarrassment Lucy endured her aunt's inspection.

"Anybody'd think," commented Ellen to herself in a mixture of indignation and amusement, " that she was a princess comin' a-visitin' instead of bein' a charity orphan."

Yet although she fumed inwardly at the girl's attitude, she did not really dislike it. Spirit flashed in the youthful face, and Ellen admired spirit. She would have scorned a cringing, apologetic Webster. Unquestionably in her niece's calm assurance there was no hint of the dependent.

As she stood serenely in the center of the room, Lucy's gaze wandered over her aunt's

shoulder and composedly scanned every detail of the kitchen, traveling from ceiling to floor, examining the spotless shelves, the primly arranged pots and pans, the gleaming tin dipper above the sink. Then the roving eyes came back to the older woman and settled with unconcealed curiosity upon her lined and sharply cut features.

Beneath the intentness of the scrutiny Ellen colored uneasily.

"Well?" she demanded tartly.

Lucy started.

"You seem to have made up your mind about me," went on the rasping voice. "Am *I* what *you* expected?"

"No."

The monosyllable came quietly.

"What sort of an aunt were you lookin' for?"

Lucy waited a moment and then replied with childlike directness:

"I thought you'd be more like Dad. And you don't look in the least like an invalid."

"You're disappointed I ain't sicker, eh?" commented Ellen grimly.

"No, indeed," answered Lucy. "I'm glad to find you so strong. But it makes me feel

you do not need me as much as I thought you did. You are perfectly able to take care of yourself without my help."

"Oh, I can take care of myself all right, young woman," Ellen returned with an acid smile. "I don't require a nurse—at least not yet."

Lucy maintained a thoughtful silence.

"I don't quite understand why you sent for me," she presently remarked.

"Didn't I write you I was lonesome?"

"Yes. But you're not."

Ellen laughed in spite of herself.

"What makes you so sure of that?"

"You don't look lonesome."

Again the elder woman chuckled.

"Mebbe I do, an' mebbe I don't," she responded. "Anyhow, you can't always judge of how folks feel by the way they look."

"I suppose not."

The reply was spoken politely but without conviction.

"An' besides, I had other reasons for gettin' you here," her aunt went on. "I mentioned 'em in my letter."

"I don't remember the other reasons."

Ellen stared, aghast.

"Why—why—the property," she managed to stammer.

"Oh, that."

The words were uttered with an indifference too genuine to be questioned.

"Yes, the property," repeated Ellen with cutting sarcasm. "Ain't you interested in money; or have you got so much already that you couldn't find a use for any more?"

The thrust told. Into the girl's cheek surged a flame of crimson.

"I haven't any money," she returned with dignity. "Dad left me almost penniless. His illness used up all we had. Nevertheless, I was glad to spend it for his comfort, and I can earn more when I need it."

"Humph."

"Yes," went on Lucy, raising her chin a trifle higher, "I am perfectly capable of supporting myself any time I wish to do so."

"Mebbe you'd rather do that than stay here with me," her aunt suggested derisively.

"Maybe," was the simple retort. "I shall see."

Ellen bit her lip and then for the second time her sense of humor overcame her.

"I guess there's no doubtin' you're a gen-

uine Webster," she replied good-humoredly. "I begin to think we shall get on together nicely."

"I hope so."

There was a reservation in the words that nettled Ellen.

"Why shouldn't we?" she persisted.

"I don't know."

"Don't you like your aunt?"

"Not altogether."

The audacity of the reply appealed to the older woman, and her eyes twinkled. "Not altogether, eh?" she echoed. "Now I'm sorry to hear that because I like you very much."

Lucy smiled. It was a radiant smile, disclosing prettily formed white teeth and a lurking dimple.

"That's nice."

"But you ain't a-goin' to return the compliment?"

"Not yet."

It was long since Ellen had been so highly entertained.

"Well," she observed with undiminished amusement, "I've evidently got to be on my good behavior if I want to keep such an independent young lady as you in the house."

"Why shouldn't I be independent?"

A few moments before Ellen would have met the challenge with derision; but now something caused her to restrain the retort that trembled on her tongue and say instead:

"Of course you've got a right to be independent. The folks that ain't ought to be made way with."

Her affirmation surprised her. She would not have confessed it, but a strange sense of respect for the girl before her had driven her to utter them.

Lucy greeted the remark graciously.

"That's what I think," she replied.

"Then at least we agree on somethin'," returned Ellen dryly, "an' mebbe before I put my foot in it an' lose this bit of your good opinion, I'd better take you up to your room."

She caught up the heavy satchel from the floor.

"Oh, don't," Luey protested. "Please let me take it. I'm used to carrying heavy things. I am very strong."

"Strong, are you?" questioned Ellen, without, however, turning her head or offering to surrender the large leather holdall. "An' how, pray, did you get so strong?" She passed

into the hall and up the stairs as she spoke, Lucy following.

"Oh, driving horses, doing housework, cooking, cleaning, and shooting," the girl replied. Then as if a forgotten activity had come to her mind as an afterthought, she added gaily: "And sawing wood, I guess."

"You can do things like that?"

"Yes, indeed. I had to after Mother died and we moved to Bald Mountain where Dad's mine was. I did all the work for my father and ten Mexicans."

"You? Why didn't your father get a woman in?"

Lucy broke into a merry laugh.

"A woman! Why, Aunt Ellen, there wasn't a woman within twenty miles. It was only a mining camp, you see; just Dad and his men."

"An' you mean to tell me you were the sole woman in a place like that?"

Lucy's silvery laughter floated upward.

"The ten Mexicans who boarded with us were engineers and bosses," she explained. "There were over fifty miners in the camp besides."

Stopping midway up the staircase Ellen wheeled and said indignantly:

"An' Thomas kep' you in a settlement like that?"

"Who?"

"Your father."

"Why not?"

"'Twarn't no place for a girl."

"It was the place for me."

"Why?"

"Because Dad was there."

Something in the reply left Ellen wordless and made her continue her way upstairs without answering. When she did speak, it was to say in a gentler tone:

"Mebbe you'll like the room I'm going to give you. It used to belong to your Dad when he was a little boy."

She lifted the latch of a paneled door and stood looking into a large bedroom. The sun slanted across a bare, painted floor, which was covered by a few braided rugs, old and worn; there was a great four-poster about which were draped chintz curtains, yellowed by age, and between the windows stood a mahogany bureau whose brasses were tarnished by years of service; two stiff ladder-back chairs, a three-cornered washstand, and a few faded photographs in pale gilt frames completed the furnishings.

With swift step Lucy crossed the room and gazed up at one of the pictures.

"That's Dad!"

Ellen nodded.

"I'd no idea he was ever such a chubby little fellow. Look at his baby hands and his drum!"

She paused, looking intently at the picture. Then in a far-away tone she added:

"And his eyes were just the same."

For several minutes she lingered, earnest and reminiscent.

"And is this you, Aunt Ellen?" she asked, motioning toward another time-dimmed likeness hanging over the bed.

"Yes."

A silence fell upon the room. Ellen fidgeted.

"I've changed a good deal since then," she observed, after waiting nervously for some comment.

"You've changed much more than Dad."

"How?"

Curiosity impelled her to cross to Lucy's side and examine the photograph.

"Your eyes—your mouth."

"What about 'em?"

"I—I—don't believe I could explain it," responded Lucy slowly.

"Mebbe you'd have liked me better as a little girl," grinned her aunt whimsically.

"I—yes. I'm sure I should have liked you as a little girl."

The reply piqued Ellen. She bent forward and scrutinized the likeness more critically. The picture was of a child in a low-cut print dress and pantalettes,—a resolute figure, all self-assurance and self-will.

It was easy to trace in the face the features of the woman who confronted it: the brows of each were high, broad, and still bordered by smoothly parted hair; the well-formed noses, too, were identical; but the eyes of the little maiden in the old-fashioned gown sparkled with an unmalicious merriment and frankness the woman's had lost, and the curving mouth of the child was unmarred by bitter lines. Ellen stirred uncomfortably.

As she looked she suddenly became conscious of a desire to turn her glance away from the calm gaze of her youthful self. Yes, the years had indeed left their mark upon her, she inwardly confessed. She did not look like that

now. Lucy was right. Her eyes had changed, and her mouth, too.

"Folks grow old," she murmured peevishly. "Nobody can expect to keep on looking as they did when they were ten years old."

Abruptly she moved toward the door.

"There's water in the pitcher, an' there's soap and towels here, I guess," she remarked. "When you get fixed up, come downstairs; supper'll be on the table."

The door banged and she was gone. But as she moved alone about the kitchen she was still haunted by the clear, questioning eyes of the child in the photograph upstairs. They seemed to follow her accusingly, reproachfully.

"Drat old pictures!" she at last burst out angrily. "They'd ought to be burnt up—the whole lot of them! They always set you thinkin'."

CHAPTER IV

THE EPISODE OF THE EGGS

THE next morning while Ellen stood at the kitchen table slicing bread for breakfast, Lucy, her figure girlish in a blue and white pinafore, appeared in the doorway.

"Good morning, Aunt Ellen," she said. "You will have to forgive me this once for being late. Everything was so still I didn't wake up. Your nice feather bed was too comfortable, I'm afraid. But it shan't happen again. After this I mean to be prompt as the sun, for I'm going to be the one to get the breakfast. You must promise to let me do it. I'd love to. I am quite accustomed to getting up early, and after serving breakfast for twelve, breakfast for two looks like nothing at all." As she spoke she moved with buoyant step across the room to the table.

"Shan't I toast the bread?" she inquired.

"I ain't a-goin' to toast it," returned Ellen in a curt tone. "Hot bread an' melted butter's bad for folks, 'specially in the mornin'."

Lucy smiled. "It never hurts me," she replied.

"Nor me," put in her aunt quickly. "I don't give it a chance to. But whether or no, I don't have it. When you melt butter all up, you use twice as much, an' there ain't no use wastin' food."

"I never thought about the butter."

"Them as has the least in the world is the ones that generally toss the most money away," the elder woman observed.

The transient kindliness of the night before had vanished, giving place to her customary sharpness of tone. Lucy paid no heed to the innuendo.

"I might make an omelet while I'm waiting," she suggested pleasantly. "Dad used to think I made quite a nice one."

"I don't have eggs in the mornin', either," replied Ellen.

"Don't you like eggs?"

"I don't eat 'em."

"How funny! I always have an egg for breakfast."

"You won't here," came crisply from her aunt.

Lucy failed to catch the gist of the remark.

"Why, I thought you kept hens," she said innocently.

"I do."

"Oh, I see. They're not laying."

"Yes, they are. I get about four dozen eggs every day," retorted Ellen. "But I sell 'em instead of eatin' 'em."

As comprehension dawned upon Lucy, she was silent.

"Folks don't need eggs in the mornin' anyway," continued Ellen, still on the defensive. "This stuffin' yourself with food is all habit. Anybody can get into the way of eatin' more 'n' more, an' not know where to stop. Bread an' coffee an' oatmeal is all anybody needs for breakfast."

If she expected a reply from her niece, she was disappointed, for Lucy did not speak.

"When you can get sixty-six cents a dozen for eggs, it's no time to be eatin' 'em," Ellen continued irritably. "You ain't come to live with a Rockefeller, Miss."

Receiving no answer to the quip, she drew a chair to the table and sat down.

"You'd better come an' get your coffee while it's hot," she called to Lucy.

Slowly the girl approached the table and seated herself opposite her aunt.

The window confronting her framed a scene of rare beauty. The Webster farm stood high on a plateau, and beneath it lay a broad sweep of valley, now half-shrouded in the silver mists of early morning. The near-at-hand field and pasture that sloped toward it were gemmed with dew. Every blade of tall grass of the mowing sparkled. Even the long rows of green shoots striping the chocolate earth of the garden flashed emerald in the morning sunlight; beyond the plowed land, through an orchard whose apple boughs were studded with ruby buds, Lucy caught a glimpse of a square brick chimney.

"Who lives in the next house?" she inquired, in an attempt to turn the unpleasant tide of the conversation. If she had felt resentment at her aunt's remarks, she at least did not show it.

"What?"

"I was wondering who lived in the next house."

"The Howes."

"I did not realize last night that you had

neighbors so near at hand," continued the girl brightly. "Tell me about them."

"There's nothin' to tell."

"I mean who is in the family?"

"There's Martin Howe an' his three sisters, if that's what you want to know," snapped Ellen.

Lucy, however, was not to be rebuffed. She attributed her aunt's ungraciousness to her irritation about the breakfast and, determining to remain unruffled, she went on patiently:

"It's nice for you to have them so near, isn't it?"

"It don't make no difference to me, their bein' there. I don't know 'em." For some reason that Lucy could not fathom, the woman's temper seemed to be rising, and being a person of tact she promptly shifted the subject.

"No matter about the Howes any more, Aunt Ellen," she said, smiling into the other's frowning face. "Tell me instead what you want me to do to help you to-day? Now that I'm here you must divide the work with me so I may have my share."

Although Ellen did not return the smile, the scowl on her forehead relaxed.

"You'll find plenty to keep you busy, I guess," she returned. "There's all the housework to be done—dishes, beds, an' sweepin'; an' then there's milk to set an' skim; eggs to collect an' pack for market; hens to feed; an'——"

"Goodness me!"

"You ain't so keen on dividin' up, eh?"

"Oh, it isn't that," returned Lucy quickly. "I was only thinking what a lot you had to do. No wonder you sent for me."

It was a random remark, but it struck Ellen's conscience with such aplomb that she flushed, dismayed.

"What do you mean?" she faltered.

As Lucy looked at her aunt, she observed the shifting glance, the crafty smile, the nervous interlacing of the fingers.

"Mean?" she returned innocently. "Why, nothing, Aunt Ellen. We must all work for a living one way or another, I suppose. If I prefer to stay here with you and earn my board there is no disgrace in it, is there?"

"No."

Nevertheless Ellen was obviously disconcerted. There was an uncanny quality in Lucy that left her with a sense that every

hiding place in her heart was laid bare. Were the girl's ingenuous observations as ingenuous as they seemed? Or were they the result of an abnormal intuition, a superhuman power for fathoming the souls of others?

Eager to escape the youthful seer, the woman pushed back her chair and rose.

" I must go out an' see what that boy Tony's up to," she said. " While I'm gone you might tidy up round here a bit. There's the dishes an' the beds; an' in the pantry you'll find the eggs with the cases to pack 'em in. An' if you get round to it you might sweep up the sittin' room."

"All right."

Drawing on a worn coat Ellen moved toward the door; when, however, her hand was on the knob, she turned and called over her shoulder:

" The washin's soakin' in the tubs in the shed. You can hang it out if you like."

Lucy waited until she saw the angular figure wend its way to the barn. Then she broke into a laugh.

" The old fox! She did get me here to work for her," she murmured aloud. "Anyway, I don't have to stay unless I like; and I shan't,

either. So, Aunt Ellen Webster, you'd better be careful how you treat me."

With a defiant shake of her miniature fist in the direction her aunt had taken, Lucy turned to attack the duties before her. She washed the dishes and put them away; tripped upstairs and kneaded the billowy feather beds into smoothness; and humming happily, she swept and polished the house until it shone. She did such things well and delighted in the miracles her small hands wrought.

"Now for the eggs!" she exclaimed, opening the pantry door.

Yes, there were the empty cases, and there on the shelf were the eggs that waited to be packed,—dozens of them. It seemed at first glance as if there must be thousands.

"And she wouldn't let me have one!" ejaculated the girl. "Well, I don't want them. But I'm going to have an egg for breakfast whether she likes it or not. I'll buy some. Then I can eat them without thanks to her. I have a little money, and I may as well spend part of it that way as not. I suppose it will annoy her; but I can't help it. I'm not going to starve to death."

During this half-humorous, half-angry

soliloquy, Lucy was packing the eggs for market, packing them with extreme care.

"I'd love to smash them all," she declared, dimpling. "Wouldn't it be fun! But I won't. I'll not break one if I can help it."

The deft fingers successfully carried out this resolution. When Ellen returned from the garden at noontime, not only was the housework done, but the eggs were in the cases; the clothes swaying on the line; and the dinner steaming on the table. She was in high good humor.

"I forgot to ask you what you had planned for us to have this noon," explained Lucy. "So I had to rummage through the refrigerator and use my own judgment."

"Your judgment seems to have been pretty good."

"I'm glad you think so."

"The Websters always had good judgment," the woman observed, as she dropped wearily into a chair. "Yes, you've got together a very good meal. It's most too good, though. Next time you needn't get so much."

Lucy regarded her aunt mischievously.

"Probably if I'd been all Webster I

shouldn't have," she remarked demurely. "But half of me, you see, is Duquesne, and the Duquesnes were generous providers."

If Ellen sensed this jocose rebuke, she at least neither resented it nor paid the slightest heed to its innuendo.

"The Duquesnes?" she questioned.

"My mother was a Duquesne."

"Oh, she was?"

"Didn't you know that?"

"Yes, I reckon I did at the time your father married, but I'd forgot about it. Thomas an' I didn't write much to one another, an' latterly I didn't hear from him at all."

"It was a pity."

"I dunno as it made much difference," Ellen said. "Likely he didn't remember much about his home an' his relations."

"Yes, indeed he did," cried Lucy eagerly. "He used to speak often of my grandparents and the old house, and he hoped I'd come East sometime and see the place where he had lived as a boy. As he grew older and was sick, I think his early home came to mean more to him than any other spot on earth."

"Queer how it often takes folks to their dyin' day to get any sense," declared Ellen

caustically. "Where'd your father pick up your mother, anyway?"

Lucy did not answer.

"I mean where did he get acquainted with her?" amended Ellen hastily.

"You never heard the story?"

"No."

"Oh, it was the sweetest thing," began Lucy enthusiastically. "You see, Grandfather Duquesne owned a coal mine up in the mountains, and Dad worked for him. One day one of the cages used in going down into the mine got out of order, and Grandfather gave orders that it was to be fixed right away lest some accident occur and the men be injured. But through a misunderstanding the work was not done, and the next day the cage dropped and killed nine of the miners. Of course the men blamed poor Grandfather for the tragedy, and they marched to his house, intending to drag him out and lynch him. Dad knew the truth, however, and he rushed to the place and held the mob back with his pistol until he could tell them the real facts. At first they were so angry they refused to listen, but by and by they did, and instead of killing Grandfather they went and found the engineers who were to blame."

Ellen waited.

"What did they do to them?" she demanded at last.

"Oh, they hung them instead of Grandfather," answered Lucy simply.

"How many of them?"

"I don't know. Three or four, I guess."

It was evident that Lucy was quite indifferent to the fate of the unlucky engineers.

"Mercy on us!" Ellen gasped.

"But their carelessness caused the death of the other men. It was only fair."

"So that's the way you settle things in the West?"

"Yes. At least, they did then."

The mountain-bred girl obviously saw nothing amiss in this swift-footed justice.

"And where did your mother come in?" asked her aunt.

"Why, you see, Grandfather Duquesne afterward made Dad the boss of the mine, and when Mother, a girl of sixteen, came home from the California convent, where she had been at school, she saw him and fell in love with him. Grandfather Duquesne made an awful fuss, but he let her marry him."

Lucy threw back her head with one of her rippling laughs.

"He had to," she added merrily. "Mother'd have married Dad anyway."

Ellen studied the tea grounds in the bottom of her cup thoughtfully.

How strange it was to picture Thomas the hero of a romance like this! She had heard that once in his life every man became a poet; probably this was Thomas's era of transformation.

Her reverie was broken by the gentle voice of Lucy, who observed:

"And that's what I'd do, too."

"What?" inquired Ellen vaguely. In her reverie about Thomas she had lost the connection.

"Marry the man I loved no matter what anybody said. Wouldn't you?"

"I—I—don't know," stammered Ellen, getting to her feet with embarrassment at having a love affair thrust so intimately upon her. "Mebbe. I must go back now to Tony an' the weedin'. When you get cleared up round here, there's plenty of mendin' to be done. You'll find that hamper full of stockin's to be darned."

After Ellen had gone out, Lucy did not rise immediately from the table, but sat watching the clouds that foamed up behind the maples on the crest of the nearby hill. A glory of sunshine bathed the earth, and she could see the coral of the apple buds sway against the sky. It was no day to sit within doors and darn socks. All Nature beckoned, and to Lucy, used from birth to being in the open, the alluring gesture was irresistible.

With sudden resolve she sprang up, cleared away the confused remnants of the meal before her, dashed to her room for a scarlet sweater, and fled into the radiant world outside.

She followed the driveway until it joined the road, and then, after hesitating an instant, turned in the direction of the Howe farm. A mischievous light danced in her brown eyes, and a smile curved her lips.

The road along which she passed was bordered on either side by walls of gray stone covered with shiny-leaved ivy and flanked by a checkerboard of pastures roughly dotted with clumps of hardhack and boles of protruding rock. Great brakes grew in the shady hollows, and from the woods beyond came the cool, moist perfume of moss and ferns.

The girl looked about her with delight. Then she began to sing softly to herself and jingle rhythmically the coins in her pocket.

It was nearly a quarter of a mile to the Howes' gate, and by the time she reached it, her swinging step had given to her cheek a color that even the apple orchard could not rival.

A quick tap on the knocker brought Mary Howe to the door. She was tall, angular, and short-sighted, and she stood regarding her visitor inquisitively, her forehead lined by a network of wrinkles.

"Could you let me have a dozen eggs?" asked Lucy.

Mary looked at the girl in waiting silence.

"I am Miss Webster's niece," explained Lucy, with an appealing smile. "We live next door, you know. Aunt Ellen didn't seem to have any eggs to spare, so ——" she stopped, arrested by Mary's expression.

"Maybe you don't sell eggs," she ventured.

"Yes, we do," Mary contrived to articulate, "but I don't know—I'm afraid ——" She broke off helplessly in the midst of the disjointed sentence and, raising her voice, called: "Eliza, is Jane there?"

"She's upstairs. I'll fetch her down," responded Eliza, coming to the door. "What is it?"

"It's Miss Webster's niece askin' for eggs."

"Miss Webster's niece! Ellen Webster's?"

The explanation had in it an intonation of terror.

"Yes."

"My land, Mary! What shall we do? Martin will never——" the awed whisper ceased. "I'll call Jane," broke off Eliza hurriedly.

Lucy heard the messenger speed across the floor and run up the stairs.

"I'm afraid I'm making you a great deal of trouble," she remarked apologetically.

"No."

"Perhaps you haven't any eggs to spare."

Mary did not reply to the words; instead she continued to look with bewilderment at the girl on the doorstep.

"Did Miss Webster send you?" she at last inquired.

Lucy laughed.

"No, indeed," she answered. "She didn't even know I was coming. You see, I only ar-

rived from Arizona last night. I've come to live with my aunt. We didn't seem to agree very well about breakfast this morning so I ——"

"Oh!"

The explanation was pregnant with understanding.

"I just thought I'd feel more independent if I ——"

A swish of skirts cut short the sentence, and in another moment all three of the Howe sisters were framed in the doorway.

Although a certain family resemblance was characteristic of them, they looked little alike. Eliza, it was true, was less angular than Mary and lacked her firmness of mouth and chin; but nevertheless the Howe stamp was upon her black hair, heavy, bushy brows, and noble cast of forehead. It was Jane's face, touched by a humor the others could not boast, that instantly arrested Lucy's attention. It was a fine, almost classic countenance which bespoke high thinking and a respect for its own soul. The eyes were gray and kindly, and in contrast to the undisguised dismay of her sisters, Jane's attitude was one of unruffled composure.

"You want some eggs?" she began with directness.

"If you can spare a dozen."

"I reckon we can."

"Now, Jane ——" interrupted Mary nervously.

"Do be careful, Jane," chimed in Eliza.

"I have a right to——" but the resolute Jane was not permitted to finish her declaration.

"Martin won't ——" interpolated Mary.

"You know Martin will be dretful put out," protested Eliza at the same instant.

"I can't help it if he is," asserted Jane impatiently. "I ain't obliged to think as he does, am I?"

"He'll be—oh, Jane!" Eliza implored.

"I'll take all the blame."

"I don't know what he'll say," pleaded Mary.

"Well, I'm going to get the eggs, anyhow," announced Jane, cutting short further argument by moving away.

During this enigmatic dialogue, Lucy's mystified gaze traveled from the face of one woman to that of another. What was it all about? And who was this Martin that he should inspire such terror?

"I'm afraid," she called to the retreating Jane, "you'd rather not ——"

"It's all right, my dear," replied Jane cordially. "We're glad to let you have the eggs. I'll get them right away. It won't take me a second."

She disappeared behind the paneled door at the end of the hall, and presently Mary and Eliza, who had loitered irresolutely, uncertain whether to go or stay, followed her.

Left to herself, Lucy looked idly across the sunny landscape. Against the sky line at the top of the hill she could see a tall, masculine figure delving in the garden.

"That must be Martin-the-Terrible," she observed. "He doesn't look like such an ogre."

The banging of the door heralded Jane's approach. She held in her hand a neatly tied package, and over her shoulders peered Mary and Eliza.

"The eggs will be sixty-seven cents," Jane said in a businesslike tone. "That is the regular market price. I'd carry the box this side up if I were you."

Lucy counted the change into the woman's palm.

"You have such a pretty home," she murmured as she did so.

"We like it," replied Jane pleasantly.

"I don't wonder. The view from this porch is beautiful. Sometime I hope you'll let me come over and see you."

Lucy heard two faint simultaneous gasps.

"I'd be glad to have you," came steadily from Jane.

"And I'd like you to come over and see me some day, too—all of you," went on the girl.

"We don't have much time for goin' out," returned Jane. "There's such a lot to do that ——" she stopped, appearing for the first time to be confused.

"I know there is," Lucy assented serenely. "I am afraid I have kept you too long from your work as it is. You must forgive me. Thank you very much for the eggs."

She extended a slender hand, which Jane grasped warmly. A smile passed between the two.

But as Lucy turned down the driveway and the door of the Howe homestead closed, a tragic babel of voices reached her ear, piping in shrill staccato the single word:

"Jane!"

CHAPTER V

A CLASH OF WILLS

When Lucy reached home she found her aunt in the sitting room bending disapprovingly over the basket of undarned stockings.

"I see you haven't touched these," she observed, in a chiding tone. "Where've you been?"

"I went to get some eggs."

"Eggs! What for?"

"For my breakfast to-morrow. You said you couldn't spare any, so I've bought some."

"Where?"

The word expressed mingled wrath and wonder.

"Next door."

The woman looked puzzled. She thought a moment.

"Where'd you say?" she asked after a pause.

"Next door—at the Howes'."

"The Howes'!" Ellen fairly hissed the name. "You went to the *Howes'* for eggs?"

"Why not?"

With a swift motion her aunt strode forward and snatched the box from Lucy's light grasp.

"You went to the Howes—to the Howes—an' told 'em I didn't give you enough to eat?"

Livid, the woman crowded nearer, clutching the girl's arm in a fierce, merciless grip; her blue eyes flashed, and her lips trembled with anger.

"I didn't say you didn't give me enough to eat," explained Lucy, trying unsuccessfully to draw away from the cruel fingers that held her.

"What did you tell 'em?"

"I just said you couldn't spare any eggs for us to use."

"Spare eggs! I can spare all the eggs I like," Ellen retorted. "I ain't a pauper. If I chose I could eat every egg there is in that pantry." She shook her niece viciously. "I only sell my eggs 'cause I'd rather," she went on.

"I thought you said we couldn't afford to have eggs when they were so high," explained Lucy. "You said they were sixty-six cents a dozen."

"I could afford to eat 'em if they was a dollar," interrupted Ellen, her voice rising. "If they were two dollars!"

"I didn't understand."

"'Tain't your business to understand," snapped her aunt. "Your business is to do as I say. Think of your goin' to the Howes—to the Howes of all people—an' askin' for eggs! It'll be nuts for them. *The Howes.*" The circling fingers loosened weakly.

"I wonder," she continued, "the Howes sold you any eggs. They wouldn't 'a' done it, you may be sure, but to spite me. I reckon they were only too glad to take the chance you offered 'em."

"They weren't glad," protested Lucy indignantly. "They didn't want to sell the eggs at all, at least two of them didn't; but the one called Jane insisted on letting me have them."

"What'd they say?"

"I couldn't understand," Lucy replied. "They seemed to be afraid of displeasing somebody called Martin. They said he wouldn't like it."

"Martin wouldn't, eh?" Ellen gave a disagreeable chuckle. "They're right there.

Martin won't like it. They'll be lucky if he doesn't flay them alive for doin' it."

"But why, Aunt Ellen? Why?" inquired Lucy.

"Because the Howes hate us, root an' branch; because they've injured an' insulted us for generations, an' are keepin' right on injurin' an' insultin' us. That's why!" Ellen's wrath, which had waned a little, again rose to a white heat. "Because they'd go any length to do us harm—every one of 'em." Again the grip on Lucy's arm tightened painfully.

Dragging the girl to the window the old woman cried:

"Do you see that pile of stones over there? That's the wall the Howes built years an' years ago—built because of the grudge they bore the Websters, likely. Did you ever look on such an eyesore?"

"Why don't they fix it?" asked Lucy naively.

"Yes, why don't they? You may well ask that!" returned Ellen with scathing bitterness. "Why don't they? Because they're too mean an' stingy—that's why. Because they think that by lettin' it go to ruin an' makin' my place look like a dump heap, they can drive me

to spend my money to do it, so'st they can save theirs. Because they're such lyin', deceitful critters they actually pretend the wall don't belong to 'em anyhow—that it's mine! *Mine!* That's why. So they leave it there, lookin' like the devil's own playground, hopin' that some day I'll get so sick of seein' it that way that I'll build it up."

She choked for breath.

"But I shan't," she went on. "I never shall, long's I live. If I was to be drawn an' quartered I wouldn't do it. No. If Martin Howe thinks he's the only person in the world who can hold out for a principle, he's mistaken. I've got a will that can match his, match his an' beat it, too, an' he'll learn it sometime. I can put up with seein' that wall just as long as he can."

A light of understanding began to break in on Lucy's bewilderment.

"I don't see ——" she began, then halted before her aunt's stern gaze.

"You don't see what? Out with it."

"I don't see why you couldn't build it up together."

"You don't!" sneered Ellen contemptuously. "You'd help those Howes fix their

wall, I s'pose, same's you'd go an' buy their eggs."

The withering intonation of the words echoed through the room.

"I'm goin' to tell you right now, Lucy Webster, that if you have a spark of pride, an atom of regard for your father, your grandfather, or your great-grandfather, you'll put all such notions as that plumb out of your head. You'll have no dealin's with the Howes. You'll just hate 'em as your folks have always hated 'em; an' you'll vow from now on that if Heaven ever gives you the chance you'll get even with 'em." The tense voice ceased.

Through the stillness the whispers of the great elm on the lawn could be heard blending with the song of a vesper sparrow. Already twilight had folded the valley in mystery until only the peaks of the hills were tipped with light.

Contrasted with the peace of the night, man's strivings seemed peculiarly out of harmony. But to Ellen's heart the scene brought no tranquillity.

"Now you know what your duty is," she concluded, with a final vindictive outburst.

"If it is my duty," the girl answered, her eyes still upon the distant landscape.

"Of course it's your duty. There ain't no question about that."

"Each of us must settle with his own conscience what his duty is," Lucy observed slowly.

"Not if it's been handed down to him," put in Ellen quickly. "I guess your duty's chalked out for you pretty plain; an' I reckon if you're any sort of a Webster you'll do it an' not go branchin' off followin' notions of your own—not after all these years."

"I don't believe in keeping up traditions unless they are good ones."

The older woman's lips tightened.

"You mean you'd break off from what your folks thought?"

"If I felt it to be right, yes."

Ellen drew a quick, impatient breath.

"You mean to say you'd set yourself up as knowin' mor'n your people before you did?"

"I believe each generation grows wiser, or ought to—wiser and kinder."

"Kindness has nothin' to do with it."

"Yes, it has," persisted Lucy softly. "Unless we become more kind, how is the world ever to become better?"

"Pish!" ejaculated Ellen. "Now see here. You ain't comin' into my house to preach to me. I'm older'n you, an' I know without bein' told what I want to do. So long's you stay under this roof you'll behave like a Webster—that's all I've got to say. If you ain't a-goin' to be a Webster an' prefer to disgrace your kin, the sooner you get out the better."

"Very well. I can go."

There was no bravado in the assertion. Had there been, Ellen would not have felt so much alarmed. It was the fearless sincerity of the remark that frightened her. She had not intended to force a crisis. She had calculated that her bullying tone would cow rather than antagonize her niece. The last result on which she had reckoned was defiance. Instantly her crafty mind recognized that she must conciliate unless she would lose this valuable helper whose toil could be secured without expense.

"Of course I don't mean—I wouldn't want you should go away," she hastened to declare. "I'm just anxious for you to do—well—what's right," she concluded lamely.

Lucy saw her advantage.

"Now, Aunt Ellen, we may as well settle this right now," she asserted. "I am quite

willing to go back to Arizona any time you say the word. I have no desire to remain where I am not wanted. But so long as I do stay here, I must be the one to decide what it is right for me to do. Remember, I am not a child. I have a conscience as well as you, and I am old enough to use it."

Ellen did not speak. She realized that Greek had met Greek and in the combat of wills she was vanquished. Nevertheless, she was not generous enough to own defeat.

"S'pose we don't talk about it any more," she replied diplomatically.

She was retreating toward the door, still smarting under the knowledge of having been vanquished, when her eye fell upon the box of eggs, which, in her excitement, she had forgotten was in her hand. A malicious gleam lighted her face. A second afterward there was a violent crash in the kitchen.

"The eggs!" Lucy heard her cry. "I've dropped 'em."

The eggs had indeed been dropped,—dropped with such a force that even the co-operation of all the king's horses and all the king's men would have been useless.

When Lucy reached her side Ellen was

bending over the wreck on the floor, a sly smile on her lips.

"They're gone, every one of 'em," she announced with feigned regret. "But it ain't any matter. You can have all the eggs you want any time you want 'em. I ain't so poverty-stricken that we can't have eggs—even if they are sixty-six cents a dozen."

She got a cloth and began to wipe up the unsightly mass at her feet.

"I paid sixty-seven cents for those," Lucy said.

"Sixty-seven cents! How long have the Howes been gettin' sixty-seven cents for their eggs, I'd like to know?" Ellen demanded, springing into an upright position.

"I couldn't say. Jane told me that was the regular market price."

"Why didn't I know it?" her aunt burst out. "They must 'a' gone up a cent, an' I sellin' mine at the store for sixty-six! Ain't it just like that meachin' Elias Barnes to do me out of a penny a dozen, the skinflint."

In the face of the present issue, the battle between Howe and Webster was forgotten.

To be cheated out of a cent by Elias Barnes and at the same time to have her business abil-

ity surpassed by that of Martin Howe! No indignity could have equaled it.

"Well, I'll get even with Elias," she blustered. "I'm fattening some hogs for him, an' I'll tuck what I've lost on the eggs right on to 'em. He shall pay that cent one way or 'nother 'fore he gets through. He needs to think to beat me. Sixty-seven cents, and I never knowin' it!"

Then the words brought still another bitter possibility to the woman's mind.

"You didn't mention to the Howes I was gettin' only sixty-six cents a dozen for eggs, did you?" she asked, wheeling on Lucy.

"No, I didn't speak of price."

"That's good," said her aunt, slightly mollified. "At least Martin Howe can't go crowin' over me—that is, unless Elias Barnes tells him. 'Twould be exactly like Elias to do it. He is just that mean."

Although Ellen did not own it, Lucy knew that had the case been reversed, she would have been the first to crow unhesitatingly not only over Elias but over Martin. Pityingly she looked at the old woman.

"If you ever get the chance to speak to those Howe women again," her aunt concluded, with

affected nonchalance, " you might tell 'em we never used their eggs. You could say I smashed 'em. I'd like Martin Howe to know it."

CHAPTER VI

ELLEN ENCOUNTERS AN ENIGMA

NEVERTHELESS, in spite of this bellicose admonition, Lucy had no opportunity during the next few weeks to deliver to the Howes her aunt's message, for Ellen, feeling that she was now blessed with an able assistant whose time must not be wasted, seized upon the mild May weather to deluge her home from top to bottom with soapsuds, sapolio, and fresh paint. From morning until night Lucy worked, scrubbing and scouring, brushing and beating.

As she toiled up the stairs, carrying pails of steaming water, she caught through the windows glimpses of the valley, its verdant depths threaded by the river's silvery windings. The heavens had never been bluer. Everywhere gladness was in the air, and the thrill of it filled the girl with longing to be in the heart of its magic.

Ellen, however, was entirely oblivious to the

miracle taking place in the universe about her. The glory of the awakening season, with its hosts of unfurling leaves and opening buds, was nothing to her. Had she not been dependent on the sun to make her garden grow, she would probably never have lifted her face to its golden rays. Only as nature furthered her projects did she acknowledge its presence.

The Howes seemed, to some extent at least, to share this disregard for the out-of-door world, for like Ellen they, too, surrendered themselves to a household upheaval quite as merciless as that of the Websters. No sooner would Martin disappear with horse and plow in the direction of the garden than the three sisters could be seen feverishly dragging mattresses on to the piazza roof for a sunning; shaking blankets; and beating rugs.

Now and then, when the sound of their measured blows reached Ellen's ears, she would leap to close the windows on the side of the house where there was danger of the Howe germs drifting in and polluting the Webster Lares and Penates.

It was one day after being thus impelled that Lucy was surprised to see her linger and stare intently.

"What are them women a-doin'?" she exclaimed at last. "Do come here, Lucy."

Discarding her mop, the girl crossed the room.

Through the gaps in the trees Mary, Eliza, and Jane Howe were plainly visible. They had shovels in their hands and were struggling with the turf at the foot of the big linden tree beside the house.

"They seem to be digging a hole," Lucy said, after watching a moment.

"What for, do you suppose?"

Ellen fidgeted at the casement for a short time and then disappeared, only to return with an old pair of field glasses. Adjusting them to her eyes, she stared at her neighbors with unconcealed curiosity.

"They *are* diggin' a hole," she declared presently. "A good deep one; whatever can they be settin' out to do?"

For an interval she looked on with interest. Then suddenly she exclaimed in an excited voice:

"They're goin' to bury somethin'! My land! What do you s'pose it is? Somethin' all done up in a bag!" She forced the binocu-

lars into Lucy's hand. "You look and see if you can't make out."

Lucy scanned the scene with mild inquisitiveness.

"They have a canvas sack," she said, "and evidently they are trying to bury it."

She handed the glass back to Ellen.

"They act as if they were in an almighty hurry," observed Ellen, as she looked. "They keep watchin' to see if anybody's comin'. Likely they're afraid Martin will catch 'em. I wish he would. What do you reckon is in that bag? I'd give worlds to know."

"I can't imagine."

Lucy had returned to her cleaning and was busy wringing out the mop. The doings of the women next door failed to interest her. But not so Ellen who, tense with speculation, hovered at the casement.

"They've got the hole dug," she announced triumphantly, "an' they're lowerin' the bag into it. It must be heavy 'cause they seem to be havin' a hard time lettin' it down in. They act as if they were afraid to touch the thing. What can it be?" she repeated for the twentieth time.

"I don't know," Lucy replied wearily.

She was tired and hungry and wished Ellen would abandon spying on her neighbors and give her a helping hand.

"Yes," commented Ellen from the window, "those women handle that bag as if they had a chiny image in it. I can't for the life of me figger out what can be in it."

For an interval there was silence. Lucy set the mop and pail out in the hall and began to clean the paint.

"They've started to cover it up," chronicled Ellen, after a pause. "They're shovelin' in the dirt—at least Mary and Jane are; Eliza's stopped helpin' 'em an' gone to see if anybody's comin'. There's somethin' dretful queer about it all. Don't you think so?"

"I don't know," answered Lucy a trifle impatiently.

Again Ellen studied the distance.

"Look!" she cried an instant later. "Look! 'Liza's callin' an' motionin' to 'em. They're droppin' their shovels and runnin' for the house like a lot of scared sheep. Probably Martin's comin', an' they don't want him to catch 'em. There! What did I tell you? It *is* Martin. I can see him drivin' over the hill. Watch 'em skitter!"

Lured more by the desire to see Martin than to observe his panic-stricken sisters, Lucy went to the window. It was even as Ellen had said. There were the retreating forms of the three female Howes disappearing in at the side door; and there was Martin, his tall figure looming in sight at the heels of his bay mare.

"He's a fine looking man, isn't he?" Lucy remarked with thoughtless impulsiveness.

"What!"

"I say he is fine looking," repeated the girl. "What broad shoulders he has, and how magnificently he carries his head!"

"You call that fine looking, do you?" sniffed her aunt.

"Yes. Don't you?"

"Martin Howe ain't my style of man."

"But he's so strong and splendid!"

"I never saw a splendid Howe yet," was Ellen's icy retort.

She turned from the window, took up a cloth, and went to scrubbing the paint viciously.

Lucy, realizing the tactlessness of her observation, tried by light, good-humored chatter to efface its memory; but all attempts to blot it from her aunt's mind were useless, and the

relations between the two women remained strained for the rest of the day. So strained and uncomfortable were they that Lucy, wearied out by her hard work, was only too glad to bid Ellen good night and seek her own room early.

Through its windows long shafts of moonlight fell across the floor, flecking it with jagged, grotesque images of the trees outside. Once alone, she did not immediately start to undress, but lingered thoughtfully looking out into the night. Every muscle in her body ached, and in her heart was a sinking loneliness. For the first time since her arrival at Sefton Falls she surrendered herself to the distaste she felt toward her aunt and her surroundings. Could she stay, she asked herself. The narrowness of the environment raised an issue vital enough; nevertheless, grave as it was, it sank into insignificance when weighed against the vastly more potent factor of Ellen's personality. The girl had come east with the intention of nursing and caring for her father's sister. She felt he would have wished her to come; and casting every other inclination aside, she had obeyed what seemed to her the voice of duty. But she had been misled, disappointed.

None of her father's kindliness lurked in this embittered, malicious-natured woman, toward whom, although bound by ties of blood, she felt neither respect nor affection. Nor did her aunt need her. After all, was it her duty to remain and waste her youth to no purpose? Could she face the horror of a stretch of years that held in them no human sympathy? What should she do? What ought she to do? Should she go or stay?

As she lingered in the darkness, her weary head heavy against the window frame, she wrestled with the future and conscientiously tried to reach some conclusion. She was eager to do what was right. Had Ellen been sick or feeble, as she had been led to suppose, she would not have questioned leaving her, querulous and tyrannical though she was. But this woman was all-sufficient and needed no one. Why should she bury her life in this cruel, rancorous atmosphere? Would her own sweetness survive the daily companionship of such a person; rather, dominated by Ellen's powerful character, might she not become inoculated by its poison and herself harden into a being as merciless and self-centered? So deep was her reverie that she did not hear the tap upon the

door. A second afterward the knob turned softly and her aunt entered.

"You ain't in bed?" she inquired in a high-pitched whisper.

"No."

"That's lucky, I hoped you wouldn't be. Come in my room quick. I want you should see what the Howes are doin'. They're out fussin' again over that thing they buried this afternoon." Ellen was obviously excited.

Sure enough! From the window that looked toward the Howe farm, three figures could be seen in the silvery light, grouped together beneath the old linden. They were armed, as before, with shovels, and all of them were digging.

"It doesn't look as if they were filling in the hole," Lucy remarked, interested in spite of herself. "They seem to be digging up what they buried."

"That's just what I thought," responded Ellen.

"Yes, they are shoveling the dirt out again," declared the girl.

For quite a while the two stood watching the frenzied movements of their neighbors.

Then Ellen gave a cry.

"See! See!" she ejaculated. "They're histin' the bag out. Did you ever see such doin's? I'd give my soul to know what they're up to. Nothin' good, you may be sure of that —or they wouldn't take the dead of night to do it. There, they've got the thing out now, and two of 'em are tugging it off between 'em. The other one's fillin' in the hole and trampin' down the earth. Seem's if I'd simply have to go over there an' find out what it's all about!"

Lucy smiled at her aunt's exasperated tone.

"Why don't you?" she asked mischievously.

Ellen gave a short laugh.

"The only way the Howes will ever get me on their land will be to chloroform me," said she grimly. "But I should like to know before I go to bed what they've been doin'. I s'pose it's no use to set up any longer, though, tryin' to figure it out. We'd both better go to sleep. Good night."

"Good night," Lucy returned.

Only too glad to escape, she hurried back to her own room, slipped out of her clothes, and was soon lost in heavy, dreamless slumber.

The day had been a strenuous one, and she was very tired, so tired that she might not have been awakened promptly had she not stirred

in her sleep and become dimly conscious of a flood of radiance upon her pillow. The morning sunshine was brilliant in the chamber, and standing in its circle of gold she beheld Ellen.

"It's six o'clock," she announced breathlessly, "an' I want you should get right up. Martin Howe's gone off to the village in his wagon, an' I can't help a-thinkin' that now he's out of the way them sisters of his will start doin' somethin' more with that bag."

"What bag?" yawned Lucy sleepily.

"Why, the bag they were buryin' last night."

"Oh, yes."

Slowly the girl's latent faculties aroused themselves.

"You hurry up and dress while I go and watch," panted Ellen. "Be quick's you can, or we may miss somethin'."

She went out, closing the door; but in a few moments her niece heard her shrill call:

"They're comin' out with it! What'd I tell you? Two of 'em have got it, carryin' it across the lawn. Ain't you 'most dressed?"

"Yes, I'm coming."

Fastening her belt as she went, Lucy hurried to her aunt's side.

Amid the sparkling, dew-kissed glory of early morning, she could plainly see the three Howes making their way through the wet grass in the direction of their pasture.

"Bless me! if they don't mean to sink it in the brook!" whispered Ellen. "Oh, I never can stand this. I've got to foller 'em an' find out what they're doin'."

"You wouldn't!" exclaimed Lucy in dismay.

"Indeed I would," her aunt retorted. "I'd go to any length to see what's in that bag. If they were younger ——" she broke off abruptly. "Anyhow, it's somethin' they're ashamed of, I'm certain of that. They couldn't 'a' murdered anybody, I s'pose. Bad's I hate 'em, I'd hardly think they're that wicked. Still what can it be?"

"I can't imagine."

"Well, I'm goin' to track 'em down, anyhow," Ellen announced. "Ain't you comin'?"

"No."

To spy on the actions of others did not appeal to the younger woman's honest mind.

"You can get breakfast while I'm gone then," Ellen said, catching up her coat, "and if I don't come back pretty soon, you go ahead

and eat yours. I'd a thousand times rather ferret out what those Howes are tryin' to bury than eat. I'd be willin' to starve to do it."

CHAPTER VII

THE UNRAVELING OF THE MYSTERY

Left to herself Lucy stood for an instant watching her aunt's resolute figure make its way under the fringe of lilacs that bordered the driveway. Then she turned her attention to preparing breakfast, and the Howes and their mysterious doings were forgotten.

In the meantime Ellen walked on, skirting the shelter of the hedge until she came into the lee of a clump of elder bushes growing along the margin of the brook at the juncture of the Howe and Webster land. Here she secreted herself and waited.

The brook was quite deep at this point and now, swollen by the snows that had recently melted on the hillsides, purled its path down to the valley in a series of cascades that rippled, foamed, and tinkled merrily.

As she stood concealed beside it, its laughter so outrivaled every other sound that she had difficulty in discerning the Howes' approach-

ing tread, and it was not until the distinct crackle of underbrush reached her ear that she became aware they were approaching. She peered through the bushes.

Yes, there they were, all three of them; and there, firm in their grasp, was the mysterious bag.

It was not large, but apparently it was heavy, and they handled it with extreme care.

"Let's put it down," puffed Mary, who was flushed and heated, "an' look for a good deep place. Ain't you tired, 'Liza?"

"I ain't so tired as hot," Eliza answered. "Warn't it just providential Martin took it into his head to go to the village this mornin'? I can't but think of it."

"It was the luckiest thing I ever knew," assented Mary. "I don't know what we'd 'a' done with this thing round the house another day. I'd 'a' gone clean out of my mind."

"I still can't understand why we couldn't 'a' left it buried," Eliza fretted.

"I explained why to you last night," Jane answered, speaking for the first time. "There warn't a spot on the place that Martin might not go to diggin' or plowin' up sometime. He

might even 'a' dug round the roots of the linden for somethin'. Ain't he always fertilizin' an' irrigatin'? I didn't dare leave the bag there. If he'd 'a' gone stickin' a pick or a shovel into it sudden ——"

"I see," interrupted Eliza. "'Twas stupid of me not to understand before. 'Course that wouldn't do. Yes, I guess you were right. There ain't much to do but sink it in the brook. Would you 'a' dreamed there could be anything in the world so hard to get rid of? All I've got to say is I hope neither Martin nor old Miss Webster finds it. What do you s'pose they'd say?"

"I wouldn't want Martin to come on to it unexpected. 'Twould worry me to death." Eliza shuddered.

"But you don't care about old Miss Webster," Jane observed with a laugh.

"I never wished Miss Webster ill, goodness knows that," returned Eliza gravely. "None of us ever did 'cept Martin, an' he's got no business to. I s'pose he'd like nothin' better than to have her run across this thing. You don't s'pose there's any danger that she will, do you, Jane?"

"Danger of her findin' it?"

"No. I mean danger of her gettin' hurt with it," explained Eliza timidly.

"Mercy, no. How could it harm her if it was wet?"

"I dunno," whimpered Eliza. "I'm so scat of such things."

"Well, it's certainly made us trouble enough!" put in Mary, with a sigh. "I've felt like a criminal ever since the thing came to light. It's seemed as if we'd never get rid of it."

Jane smiled. "I know it," she said. "Who'd 'a' believed 'twould be so hard. When I think what we've been through tryin' to make way with it, I wonder folks ever are wicked. It's so much trouble. 'Tain't half as easy as it looks. You've got to have your wits about you every second. This affair's taught me that. Ain't I been all over the face of the earth tryin' to find a safe place to hide this pesky bag! First I tried the mountain. Then I was afraid the woodcutters might find it, so I had to cart it home again. Then it come to me to drive down to the river and dump it in. Anybody'd have said that was simple enough. But halfway there, I met Elias Barnes walkin' to the village, an' he asked for a ride. I s'pose

he couldn't see why I couldn't take him in; I had an empty seat an' had often done it before, so I had to. But when he started lightin' up his pipe ——"

"What did you do, Jane?" cried Mary.

"I guess I nearly screamed," answered Jane, laughing. "He looked some surprised; anyhow, I told him I just remembered somethin' I'd left behind, an' I drew up an' put him down quicker'n chain lightnin'. Then I turned round and drove off lickety-split for home, leaving him stock still in the middle of the road starin' after me."

"You showed good nerve, Jane, I'll say that," Mary declared with open admiration.

"Now if it had been me, I'd 'a' just given the whole thing away. I ain't no good at thinkin' quick."

"Well, we ain't got to think about it any more, thank goodness," Jane exclaimed, rising from the grass and laying a hand on the bag. "Let's put an end to the whole thing now and go home. Take a holt of the other end, and we'll flop it in."

"Wait!" Eliza protested, seized by a sudden idea.

"Well."

"You don't s'pose there'll be any danger 'bout the cows drinkin' here, do you?" Eliza inquired anxiously. "They do drink here, you know, and in the summer, when the water's low, they often wade right in. If they was to ——"

She stopped.

"I never thought of that," Jane said in a discouraged tone. "Oh, my land, what are we going to do with it?"

She let the bag sink to the ground and, straightening herself up, confronted her sisters. "We've simply got to get it off our hands before Martin gets back."

"Oh, yes, yes!" pleaded Mary, affrighted. "Do something with it, Jane, no matter what. I never could stand it to have it carted back to the house and hidden there. 'Tain't safe. Besides, in these days of German spies, 'twould be an awful thing to be found on us. S'pose the house was to be searched. We never could make the police believe how we came to have it. They might take us and shut us all up in prison —Martin and all."

Her voice shook with terror.

"I guess they wouldn't go arrestin' us, Mary," declared Jane soothingly. "Still, I

agree with you that it's just as well for us to be clear of such a thing; let me think."

While she stood meditating her two sisters watched her with perturbed faces.

"Ellen Webster's cows don't come up to this end of the pasture much, do they?" she remarked at last.

"No. Leastways I've never seen 'em here," replied Mary.

"Then why don't we sink the bag just across the wall?"

"On her land?" gasped Eliza.

"It wouldn't do any harm," argued Jane. "She never comes up here, nor her cows nor horses either. We'll climb right over and dump the thing in. That'll settle Martin's ever finding it, an' everythin'."

"But s'pose——" Eliza objected once more.

"Oh, 'Liza, we can't stay here s'posin' all day!" Jane declared decisively. "We got to put this bag somewheres, an' there ain't any spot that ain't got some out about it. We must take a chance on the best one we can find."

"I'm frightened to death!" wailed Eliza.

"So'm I!" Mary echoed. "Oh, Jane!"

"No matter. Pull yourself together," or-

dered Jane sharply. "You two take a hold of the bag an' bring it along, while I climb the wall."

Ellen, stooping behind the elderberry bushes, held her breath. She saw Jane clamber over the barrier and help Mary and Eliza to mount it and lower the sack into her hands; then, just when the three invaders were all ready to drop their mysterious gray burden into the stream, she stepped noiselessly into the open and said loudly:

"What you doin' in my brook?"

A cry rose from the two more timorous Howes, and even Jane paled a little.

"What are you sinkin' in my brook?" repeated Ellen.

No answer came. Angered by their silence, the woman stepped nearer.

"What you got in that bag?" she demanded sternly.

Still there was no reply.

"You ain't got nothin' good in it, I'll be bound," went on the tormentor. "If you had, you wouldn't be so mighty anxious to get rid of it. Come now, long's you're intendin' to heave it into the water on my side of the wall, s'pose you let me have a peep inside it."

Striding forward, she seized a corner of the canvas roughly in her hand.

There was a scream from the three Howes.

"Don't touch it!"

"Keep away!"

"You'd better leave it be, Miss Webster," Jane said in a warning voice. "It's gunpowder."

"Gunpowder!" repeated Ellen.

"Yes."

"An' what, may I ask, are you doin' with a bag of gunpowder in my brook? Plannin' to blow up my cows, I reckon."

"No! No, indeed we're not!" protested Mary.

"We wouldn't hurt your cows for anything, Miss Webster," put in Eliza.

"Humph! You wouldn't? Still you don't hesitate to dam my brook up with enough gunpowder to blow all my cattle higher'n a kite."

"We were only tryin' to ——" began Mary; but Jane swept her aside.

"Hush, Mary," she said. "You an' 'Liza keep still an' let me do the talkin'."

Drawing herself to her full height she faced Ellen's evil smile.

"The day before yesterday, when we were

cleanin' the attic, we found a little door under the eaves that we'd never come across before," she began desperately. "We discovered it when we were movin' out a big chest that's always stood there. We were sweepin' behind all the trunks an' things, an' long's we were, we decided to sweep behind that. 'Twas then we spied the door. Of course we were curious to know where it went to, an' so we pried it open, an' inside we found this bag together with an old rusty rifle. It must 'a' been there years, judgin' from the dust an' cobwebs collected on it. We were pretty scared of the gun," declared Jane, smiling reminiscently, "but we were scared a good sight worse when after draggin' the bag out we saw 'twas marked *Gunpowder.*"

She waited an instant.

"We didn't know what to do with it," she went on, speaking more hesitatingly, "because you see my brother doesn't like us to turn the house upside-down with cleanin'; he hates havin' things disturbed; an' we were afraid he would be put out to find what we'd done. So we decided to wait till some time when he wasn't round an' make way with it."

Jane caught her breath.

"We've tried lots of ways," she confessed wearily, "but none of 'em seemed to work. First I thought of hidin' it up near Pine Ridge, but I was afraid some woodsman might happen on it; then I started to take it down to the river in our wagon; but Elias Barnes would get in an' light his pipe, and I was so afraid a spark from it might ——"

"I wish it had!" interpolated Ellen Webster with fervor.

"In order to get rid of him I had to turn round an' come back," narrated Jane, paying no heed to the interruption. "Then we tried to bury it, but afterward we dug it up for fear Martin might plow it up sometime an' get ——"

"'Twould 'a' been an almighty good joke if he had!" again piped Ellen.

"So there didn't seem to be any other way," concluded Jane with dignity, "but to drop it in the brook; an', as you never seemed to use this end of your pasture, we decided to sink it here."

The narrative was true, every word of it. Ellen knew that. No one who looked into Jane Howe's frank face could have doubted the story.

But Ellen was an ungenerous enemy who saw in the present happening an opportunity to put a screw upon those who had been thus compelled to throw themselves upon her mercy.

"So! That's how you lie out of it, is it?" she cried scornfully. "An' you expect me to believe a yarn like that! Do you s'pose I don't know this country's at war, an' that the authorities are on the lookout for folks concealin' gunpowder in their houses? How do I know you weren't goin' to make the stuff into bombs, or carry it somewheres an' blow up somethin' or other with it?"

"Indeed, oh, indeed we weren't," Mary cried, thoroughly alarmed.

"Oh, what shall we do!" Eliza sobbed, wringing her hands.

"Nonsense," cut in Jane. "You know perfectly well, Miss Webster, we ain't no German plotters. I'm sorry ——"

"You're sorry I caught you before you had a chance to drop that bag in my brook," said Ellen, a twinkle in her eye. "I'll bet you are. Have you thought that I can have you arrested for trespassing on my land?"

"Oh, Jane!"

The horrified voices of Mary and Jane

greeted with concern this new danger. Ellen was exulting in her triumph.

"You can, of course, have us arrested if you wish to," said Jane.

"Well, I ain't a-goin' to—at least I ain't, on one condition. An' I'll promise not to give you over to the police as spies, neither, if you do as I say."

"What do you want us to do?" inquired Mary and Eliza breathlessly.

Jane was silent.

"Mebbe *you'd* like to know the condition," sneered the old woman, addressing Jane.

She waited for a reply, but none came. Ellen looked baffled.

"You'd better accept the chance I give you to buy yourself off," she said.

"That is my affair."

"Do, Jane! Do promise," begged Mary and Eliza. "Please do, for our sakes."

"Very well," Jane returned. "But I only do it to protect my sisters. What is the condition?"

With head thrown back she faced Ellen coldly.

"The condition is that you take that bag of gunpowder back home to your brother Martin

an' tell him Ellen Webster sent it to him with her compliments. He can use it blastin' out stones to fix up his stone wall."

Then, with a taunting laugh, the woman turned and without more adieu disappeared in the direction of the Webster homestead, leaving a speechless trio of chagrined Howes behind her.

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN THE CAT'S AWAY

May came and went, and June, rich in days of splendor, made its advent, and still Lucy caught only fleeting glimpses of the Howes.

Martin, to be sure, was daily abroad, toiling with the zest of an Amazon in garden and hay-field. Against the homely background of stubble or brown earth, his sturdy form stood out with the beauty of a Millet painting. But his sisters held themselves aloof, avoiding all possibility of contact with their neighbors.

Doubtless the encounter with Ellen had left its scar; for against their will they had been compelled to take up the sack of powder and tug it homeward; and then, in compliance with their promise, deliver it over to Martin who had first ridiculed their adventure; then berated them; and in the end set the explosive off so near the Webster border line that its defiant boom had rattled every pane of glass in the old house.

Ellen had chuekled at this spirited elimax to the episode. It was like Martin, she said. But Lucy regretted the whole affair and found diffieulty in applauding her aunt's dramatie imitation of the affrighted Howes and their final ignominous retreat. Of course it was only to be expeeted that the women next door should resent the incident and that they should inelude her, innoeent though she was, in this resentment. Nevertheless, it was a pity that the avenue to further friendly advanees between herself and them should be so summarily elosed.

Lucy was very lonely. Having been the eenter of a large and noisy household and reeeived a disproportionate degree of homage from her father's employees, the transition from sovereign to slave was overwhelming. She did not, however, rebel at the labor her new environment entailed, but she did ehafe beneath its slavery. Nevertheless, her eaptivity, mueh as it irked her, was of only trivial importanee when eompared with the greater evil of being eompletely isolated from all sympathetic eompanionship. Between herself and her aunt there existed such an utter lack of unity of prineiple that the chasm thereby

created was one which she saw with despair it would never be possible to bridge. Had the gulf been merely one of tastes and inclinations, it would not have been so hopeless. But to realize they had no standards in common and that the only tie that bound them together was the frail thread of kinship was a disheartening outlook indeed.

It was true that as time went on this link strengthened, for Ellen developed a brusque liking for her niece, even a shamefaced and unacknowledged respect. Notwithstanding this, however, the fundamentals that guided the actions of the two remained as divergent as before, and beyond discussions concerning garden and home, a few anecdotes relating to the past, and a crisp and not too delicate jest when the elder woman was in the humor, their intercourse glanced merely along the shallows.

Over and over, when alone, Luey asked herself why she stayed on at Sefton Falls to sacrifice her life on the altar of family loyalty. Was not her youth being spent to glorify an empty fetish which brought to no one any real good?

But the query always brought her back to the facts of her aunt's friendlessness and in-

firmity. For defy Time as she would, Ellen was old and was rapidly becoming older. Whether with the arrival of a younger and more energetic person she was voluntarily relinquishing her hold on her customary tasks, or whether a sudden collapse of her vitality forced her to do so, Luey could not determine; nevertheless, it was perfectly apparent that she daily attacked her duties more laggingly and complained less loudly when things were left undone.

When, however, Luey tried to supplement her diminishing strength by offers of aid, Ellen was quick to resent the imputation that she was any less robust than she had been in the past, and in consequence the girl confronted the delicate problem of trying to help without appearing to do so.

Parallel with this lessening of physical zeal ran an exaggerated nervous irritability very hard to bear. Beneath the lash of her aunt's cruel tongue Lucy often writhed, quivered, and sometimes wept; but she struggled to keep her hold on her patience. Ellen was old, she told herself, and the self-centered life she had led had embittered her. Moreover, she was approaching the termination of her days, and to

a nature like hers the realization that there was no escape from her final surrender to Death filled her with impotent rage. She had always conquered; but now something loomed in her path which it was futile and childish to seek to defy.

Therefore, difficult as was Lucy's present existence, she put behind her all temptation to desert this solitary woman and leave her to die alone. Was not Ellen her father's sister, and would he not wish his daughter to be loyal to the trust it had fallen to her to fulfill? Was she not, as a Webster, in honor bound to do so?

In the meantime, as if to intensify this sense of family obligation, Lucy discovered that she was acquiring a growing affection for the home which for generations had been the property of her ancestors. The substantial mansion, with its colonial doorways surmounted by spreading fans of glass, its multi-paned windows and its great square chimney, must once have breathed the very essence of hospitality, and it did so still, even though closed blinds and barred entrances combined to repress its original spirit. Already the giant elm before the door had for her a significance quite different

from that of any other tree; so, too, had the valley with its shifting lights. She loved the music of the brook, the rock-pierced pasture land, the minarets of the spruces that crowned the hills. The faintly definable mountains, blue against the far-off sky, endeared themselves to her heart, weakening her allegiance to the barren country of her birth and binding her to this other home by the magic of their enchantment.

Here was the spot where her forefathers had lived and toiled. Here were the orchards they had planted, the fields they had tilled, the streams they had fished, the hills they had climbed; and here was the house built by their hands, the chairs in which they had rested, the beds in which they had slept. Her former life had contained none of these elements of permanence. On the contrary, much of the time she had been a nomad, the mining settlements that gave her shelter being frankly regarded as temporary halting places to be abandoned whenever their usefulness should become exhausted.

But here, with the everlasting hills as a foundation, was a home that had been and should be. Tradition breathed from the very

soil, and Lucy's veneration for the past was deep-rooted. Therefore, despite her aunt's acrimonious disposition, the opposition of their ideals, despite drudgery and loneliness, she stayed on, praying each day for increased patience and struggling to magnify every trace of virtue she could discover in Ellen.

Now that the planting was done, the weeding well in hand, the house-cleaning finished, the girl contrived to so systematize her work that she should have intervals of leisure to escape into the sunshine and, beneath the vastness of the arching heaven, forget for the time being at least all that was rasping and petty.

It was absurd to be lonely when on every hand Nature's voices spoke with understanding. Was she joyous? The birds caroled, the leaves danced, the brook sang. Was she sad? The whisper of the great pines brought peace and balm to her spirit.

It was in search of this sympathy that she had set forth along the highway to-day. The late afternoon was a poem of mystic clouds and mysterious shadows. Far off against the distant horizon, mountains veiled in mists lifted majestic peaks into the air, their summits lost amid swiftly traveling masses of whiteness;

rifts of purple haze lengthened over the valley; and the fields, dotted with haycocks, breathed forth the perfume of drying grass.

As Lucy walked along she began singing softly to herself. Her day's work was done; and her aunt, who had driven with Tony to bring home a load of lumber from the sawmill, would not return until late in the evening. Six delicious hours were her own to be spent in whatever manner her fancy pleased. It was an unheard-of freedom. Never since she had come to Sefton Falls had she known such a long stretch of liberty. What wonder that she swung along with feet scarce touching the earth!

A redwing called from the bracken bordering the brook, and the girl called back, trying to mimic its glad note. She snatched a flower from the roadside and tucked it in her hair; she laughed audaciously into the golden face of the sun. Her exuberance was mounting to ecstasy when she rounded a curve and suddenly, without warning, came face to face with Jane Howe.

The woman was proceeding with extreme care, carrying in either hand a large and well-heaped pail of berries.

Before Lucy thought, she stepped forward and exclaimed impulsively:

"Do let me help you! They must be dreadfully heavy."

"'Tain't so much that they're heavy," Jane answered, smiling, "as that they're full. I'm afraid I'll spill some."

"Give me one pail."

"Do you really mean it?"

"Of course. I'd be glad to take it."

"All right," replied Jane simply. "I'm sure I'd be only too thankful if you would. After trampin' miles to pick raspberries, you ain't so keen on losin' 'em when you're within sight of home."

"Indeed you're not," Lucy assented. "These are beauties. Where did you go for them?"

"Most up to the pine ridge you see yonder. I took my lunch an' have been gone since mornin'."

"How I wish I could have gone with you!"

"Would you have liked to?" queried Jane incredulously. "Then I wish you might have. It was just the sort of a day to walk. I don't s'pose, though, your aunt would have spared you for an all-day picnic."

There was a hint of scorn in the words.

"I don't often have time to go far from the house," replied Lucy gently, ignoring Miss Howe's challenge. "There is so much to do."

"So there is," agreed Jane hastily. "Certainly we manage to keep busy all the time. When it ain't one thing, it's another. There never seems to be any end to it. But I did steal off to-day. The berries were really an excuse. Of course we can make 'em into jam. Still, what I really wanted was to get out in the air."

"I've stolen off too," said Lucy, with a smile. "My aunt and Tony have gone over to the Crossing for lumber and won't be back until dark, so I am having a holiday."

Jane was silent a moment.

"Why shouldn't you come over and have tea with us then?" she asked abruptly. "We're all alone, too. My brother's gone to the County Fair an' ain't comin' back 'til to-morrow."

Lucy's eyes lighted with pleasure.

"You're very kind," she cried, a tremor of happiness in her tone. "I'd love to come."

They walked along, balancing their burden of berries and chatting of garden, weather, and housework.

As they turned in at the Howe gate, Jane motioned proudly toward three rows of flourishing vines that were clambering up a network of sustaining brush.

"Those are our sweet peas," she remarked. "The first row is Mary's; they're white. Then come Eliza's—pink ones. Mine are purple. Martin won't plant his over here. He has 'em longside of the barn, an' they're all colors mixed together. We don't like 'em that way, but he does. He's awful fond of flowers, an' he has great luck with 'em, too. He seems to have a great way with flowers. But he never cuts one blossom he raises. Ain't that queer? He says he likes to see 'em growin'."

They were nearing the house.

"I reckon Mary an' 'Liza will be surprised enough to have me come bringin' you home," observed Jane a trifle consciously. "We ain't done much neighboring, have we?"

"No," returned Lucy quickly, "and I've been sorry. It seems a pity we shouldn't be friends even if——" she stopped, embarrassed.

"Even if your aunt an' Martin do act like a pair of fools," interrupted Jane. "Senseless, ain't it! Besides, it ain't Christian livin'

at odds with people. I never did approve of it."

"I'm sure I don't."

Jane nodded.

"We imagined you were like that," she said. "I told Mary an' 'Liza so the day you come for the eggs. 'She ain't like her aunt,' I says to Mary, 'not a mite; an' you can be pretty sure she won't be in sympathy with all this squabblin' an' back-bitin'.'"

"Indeed I'm not."

"We ain't either, not one of us. We'd like nothin' better'n to be neighborly an' run in. It's the only decent way of doin' when folks live side by side. But Martin wouldn't listen to our doin' it, even if your aunt would—which I know she wouldn't. He's awful set against the Websters."

"How silly it seems!"

"That's what I tell him," Jane declared. "Of course your aunt's an old woman, an' 'tain't surprisin' she should harbor a grudge against us. But Martin's younger, an' had oughter be more forgivin'. It's nonsensical feelin' you've got to be just as sour an' crabbed as your grandfather was. I don't humor him in it—at least not more'n I have to to keep the

peace. But Mary an' 'Liza hang on to every word Martin utters. If he was to say blue was green, they'd say so too. They'd no more do a thing he wouldn't like 'em to than they'd cut off their heads. They wouldn't dare. I 'spect they'll have a spasm when they see you come walkin' in to-night."

"Maybe I ought not to come," Lucy murmured in a disappointed voice.

"Yes, you ought," Jane said with decision. "Why should we keep up a quarrel none of us approve of? Martin ain't home. It's nothin' to him."

"Well, if you're sure you want me," Lucy laughed and dimpled.

"If I hadn't wanted you, you may be pretty sure I shouldn't have asked you," retorted Jane bluntly. "Mary an' 'Liza will likely be scat to death at first, but they'll get over it an' thaw out. Don't pay no attention to 'em."

Jane had ascended the steps and her hand was on the latch.

"I feel like a child playing truant," said Lucy, a flush of excitement tinting her cheek. "You see, my aunt wouldn't like my being here any more than Mar—than your brother would."

"What they don't know won't hurt 'em," was Jane's brief answer.

"Oh, I shall tell Aunt Ellen."

"I shan't tell Martin. He'd rage somethin' awful."

She threw open the door. Lucy saw her stiffen with resolution.

"I picked up Miss Lucy Webster on the road an' brought her home to tea!" she called from the threshold.

Mary and Eliza were busy at the kitchen table. At the words they turned and automatically gasped the one phrase that always sprang to their lips in every emergency:

"Oh, Jane!"

"Martin's away an' so's Ellen Webster," went on Jane recklessly. "Why shouldn't we do a bit of neighborin' together, now we've got the chance?"

"But—but Martin!" Eliza managed to stammer.

"He'll never be the wiser—unless you tell him," replied Jane merrily. "Come, Miss Lucy, take off your hat an' make yourself at home. Supper'll soon be ready, I guess."

The phrase was a fortunate one, for it brought back to the disconcerted Howes the

memory of their domestic prowess, a thing in which they took great pride. By nature they were hospitable, and here was a chance to exercise that long unexercised faculty.

Mary bustled to the stove.

"Yes," she answered, "the biscuits are in the oven, an' I was just makin' the tea." Then, as if emboldened by Jane's attitude, she added timidly: "We're real glad to see you, Miss Webster; don't think we ain't."

"Yes," Eliza echoed, "we really are."

The first shock of the adventure having passed, it was amazing to see with what rapidity the Howe sisters increased the warmth of their welcome. From the top shelf in the pantry they brought forth the *company preserves;* fruit cake was unearthed from the big stone crock in the dining-room closet; and, as a final touch to the feast, Jane beat up a foamy omelet and a prune whip. In their enjoyment they were like a group of children, an undercurrent of delight in the forbidden tinging their mirth.

Lucy told stories of her western life, and the three women listened as if to the tales of Sir John Mandeville. The hours passed, twilight deepened, night fell, but the revelers heeded

it not. What a sweet, wholesome evening it was! And how kindly, Lucy thought, were these simple souls whose feeling toward every breathing creature was so benign and sympathetic. Contrasted with the antagonistic atmosphere of the Webster house, this home was like paradise. It restored her faith in human nature and in Sefton Falls. Every one in the place was not, then, bitter and suspicious. What a comfort to know it!

In the meantime Mary, having reached a pitch of hilarity almost unprecedented, was starting to tell a story when suddenly her face stiffened and, turning white, she half rose from her chair.

There was a scuffling of feet in the hall and in another instant Martin Howe entered.

"The fair wasn't worth my stayin' to," he explained from the doorsill, "so I came along home to-night instead of waitin' till to-morrow. Looks to me as if I was just in time for a snack of supper."

Standing in the lamplight, his stern face softened by a smile and a glow of good humor, he was attractive to look upon. The firm countenance was lined, it is true, but the lines gave it strength and brought into harmony the

clear eyes, resolute mouth, and well-molded chin. He had a fine smooth forehead from which his black hair, lightly sprinkled with gray, was tossed aside in picturesque abandon. Health and power spoke in every curve of the lithe frame and in the boyish grace with which he moved.

With his coming a hush fell upon the room. Had a group of conspirators been unexpectedly confronted with their own crimes, they could not have been more abashed than were the four women seated at the table.

Jane was the first to recover herself. In a voice that trembled but did not falter she said courageously:

"Miss Lucy Webster's havin' tea with us, Martin."

There was an awkward pause.

Lucy, whose glance had dropped to the floor, raised her eyes appealingly to the man's face; but she found in it no answering sympathy. In the short interval it had changed from geniality to a sternness almost incredible of belief. It was hard now—merciless.

Perhaps, to do Martin justice, he could not have spoken at that moment had he tried. This creature, with her wealth of golden hair, her

radiant eyes, flashed upon his vision with the glory of a new star. She was a phenomenon hitherto unknown. No matter what her name, the simple fact of her presence would have put to flight every other thought and left him dumb. The proudly poised head, the rounded white throat, the flushed cheek with its elusive dimples, the tiny hands were all marvels unfamiliar to Martin Howe.

Could this nymph, this dryad be a product of the same planet that had given birth to Mary, Eliza, and Jane?

With no attempt to conceal his artless scrutiny, he looked, and before his ingenuous wonder Lucy felt her pulse bound.

"I must go home," she said, struggling to appear composed and ignoring the speechless Martin as if he were in reality as many miles away as she had supposed him. "I had no idea it was so late. Good night and thank you for my pleasant evening."

None of the Howes attempted to stay her departure, although Jane followed her with feigned imperturbability to the door, remarking by way of conversation:

"It's dretful dark outside, ain't it?"

Lucy smiled.

"Yes, but I don't mind."

To have escaped Martin Howe's eyes, which continued to rest upon her, she would have plunged into a den of lions. The beating of her heart, the burning of her cheek angered and disconcerted her.

Jane unfastened the door. Then she started back in consternation.

"Mercy!" she cried. "It's rainin'!"

"Rainin'?" Eliza exclaimed.

"Yes, pourin'. It's an awful shower."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," asserted Lucy, impatient to be gone. "I never mind the rain."

"But this is a regular downpour. You'll get wet to your skin," Jane objected. "I ain't a-goin' to let you go out in it in that thin dress. Ain't we got an umbrella somewheres, 'Liza?"

"I dunno," Eliza answered vaguely.

The sudden shower and the furious tossing of the trees did not impress themselves on her dull mind. Only one thought possessed her brain,—the sinking dread of the moment when Lucy should be gone and Martin would empty the vials of his waiting wrath on all their heads.

"Indeed I don't in the least need an um-

brella," Lucy protested. "I'll run right along. Please do not bother."

"You'll get wet an' be sick," Mary declared, launching into the conversation at the mention of possible chills and fevers.

Lucy laughed unsteadily.

"Oh, no, I shan't. Good night."

She had crossed the veranda and was at the brink of the flight of steps when heavy feet came striding after her.

"Wait! I'm goin' with you," said a tense voice. It was Martin.

"Thank you very much, but I really don't need anybody."

"I'm goin'," repeated the man doggedly.

"I don't want you to," Lucy returned curtly, nettled into irritability.

"Likely not," observed Martin with stolid determination.

"I wish you wouldn't," fretted Lucy angrily. "I'd much rather ——"

It was like a child helplessly dashing itself against a wall. Martin paid no attention to her protests. With a lighted lantern in one hand and an umbrella in his other, he set forth with Lucy down the driveway.

Overhead the trees wrenched and creaked,

and above the lashings of their branches the rain could be heard beating with fury upon the tossing foliage. Once in the blackness Lucy stumbled and, following the instinct for self-preservation, put out her hand and caught Martin's arm; then she drew her hand quickly away. They proceeded in silence until they reached the gate at the foot of the long Webster driveway; then the man spoke:

"'Tain't fur now," he said, halting short. "I'll give you the umbrella." He held it out to her.

"But you'll get drenched."

"No, indeed!"

"But you will," insisted Lucy with spirit.

"No matter."

"It is matter. Besides, I can't see my way to the house without the lantern. It's dark as pitch."

"Take 'em both, then."

"Of course I shan't," replied the girl indignantly. "And anyway, if I did, I couldn't carry the two in this wind. If I can't have but one, I'd rather have the lantern."

"That's nonsense!" Martin returned. "What use was there in my bringin' you home if you get soaked now?"

"But I can't see an inch before my face without a light."

"Just as you say, then. Here it is." Holding out the lantern, he took back the umbrella.

"But you certainly are not going to leave me to go up that long avenue in the rain," burst out Lucy.

"You said you didn't mind rain," retorted the man ironically.

He stood immovable in the torrent, but the lantern glow showed his face to be working convulsively.

Lucy, who could not believe that in the present emergency his stubbornness would persist, waited.

"I ain't comin'," he remarked half to himself with dogged determination, as if he were bolstering up some inward wavering of principle. "I ain't comin'."

The touch of her hand still vibrated upon his arm, and he could feel the flutter of her dress against his body.

"I ain't comin'," he repeated between his closed teeth.

"Very well."

With dignity, Lucy picked up her limp skirts, preparatory to breasting the storm.

"I *can't* go with you," he suddenly burst out. "Don't you see I can't?"

A wailing cry from the wind seemed to echo the pain in his voice. The girl did not answer. Refusing both the light and shelter he offered her, she stepped resolutely forth into the blackness of the night. Helplessly he watched her go, the lantern's rays reflecting her white gown.

"I shan't bother you again, Mr. Howe," she called bitterly.

Martin made no reply but raised the lantern higher that it might brighten the rough path. Unheeding him, the girl stumbled through the darkness, the rain beating down upon her.

As she neared the house a faint glow flickered through the shrubbery, making it evident that her aunt had already arrived home. Nervously she mounted the porch and turned to look behind her. At the foot of the drive stood Martin, the lantern high in his hands.

Now that Lucy was safely within the shelter of her own domain, her sense of humor overcame her, and with an irresistible desire to torment him, she called mischievously from her vantage ground on the veranda:

"Thank you so much for bringing me home, Mr. Howe. Can't I persuade you to come in?"

There was a smothered exclamation of wrath in the distance, and she saw a gleam of light precipitate itself hastily into the road, where, for a moment, it flashed along the tree trunks, then disappeared.

Lucy laughed.

Ellen was in the kitchen when she entered.

"Where on earth have you been?" she demanded. "I should 'a' thought you might 'a' come back in time to start the fire up an' get supper. It's awful late. Was it Tony you was talkin' to outside?"

"No."

"It warn't?" she turned a hawklike glance on her niece. "Who was it?" she asked inquisitively.

"Mr. Howe."

"Mr. Ho —— Not *Martin* Howe!"

Lucy nodded.

"Yes."

"Martin Howe here—*on my land!* What was he doin'?"

"He wasn't on your land," Lucy said. "He left me at the gate. He was seeing me home. I've been there to supper."

"What!"

Never had the girl heard so many sensations

crowded into one word. There was surprise, unbelief, scorn, anger. But anger predominated.

"An' how long, pray tell me, have you been goin' backwards an' forrads to the Howes, an' consortin' with their brother?"

"Only to-night."

Ellen looked at her niece as if, had she dared, she would have torn her in pieces. "I s'pose it never entered your head it was a mean advantage for you to take when I was gone," she said shrilly. "You wouldn't 'a' dared do it if I'd been here."

"I'm not so sure."

The fearless response was infuriating to Ellen.

"Well, I'll tell you one thing," she shouted, bringing her clenched hand down on the table with such force that every dish rattled. "You ain't to repeat this night's performance! If you ain't got pride enough not to go hobnobbin' with my enemies, I'll forbid it for good an' all—forbid it, do you hear? I ain't a-goin'——"

Something in the quiet dignity of the girl before her arrested her tongue. Her eye traveled over the white, rain-drenched figure.

Then the corners of her mouth twitched and curved upward.

"So Martin Howe saw you home, did he?" she observed sarcastically. "Much good his comin' did! Had you tramped ten miles you couldn't 'a' got much wetter. I guess he needs some lessons in totin' ladies round same's he does in most everything else. I always said he didn't have no manners—the puppy!"

CHAPTER IX

JANE MAKES A DISCOVERY

Martin Howe moved home as if in a trance, the voice of Lucy Webster ringing in his ears. He recalled every glance, every smile, every gesture of this enslaving creature, who, like a meteorite, had shot across his firmament, rocking its serenity with the shock of her presence. How exquisite she was! How wonderful! He had never realized there were women like that. Was it to be marveled at that men pursued such enchantresses to the borderland of eternity? That they were spurred to deeds of courage; abandoned home, friends, their sacred honor; even tossed their lives away for such?

Lucy's advent seemed to mark a new era in existence. All that went before was not; and all that came after, apart from her, mattered not. Only the vivid, throbbing present was of consequence, and the intensity of it swept him out of his balance with a force that was appalling.

He was not the Martin Howe of yesterday, nor could he ever again be that happy, emotionless being. Within him warred a tumult of new sensations that seethed, flamed, maddened, consumed. The fact that they were the fires of a volcano that must forever smolder its passion out did not at first impress his consciousness. All that he knew was that Lucy Webster was to him what no other woman had ever been or could be; she was his ideal, his mate, his other soul; the completing element of his incomplete nature. The emptiness of his life, of which he had hitherto been only vaguely aware, now translated itself into the concrete terms of heart, mind, and sex. He had been struggling to make of himself a whole when in truth he was but a half; to construct from imperfect parts a unit; and not sensing the hopelessness of the attempt, he had reaped only failure and disappointment.

How blind he had been not to understand that alone he could never hope to still loneliness, heartache, and the stirrings of his physical nature. He had lived a life in which no one shared and with which no one sympathized. His fostering instincts had lain dormant until they had reverted to the receptivity of the pro-

tected rather than serving their natural functions and making of him a protector. All the masculinity of his being had been dwarfed, stifled. Now it awakened, clamoring to possess, guard, cherish, worship.

What an amazing miracle it was—what a glad, transforming touch of magic! He laughed in delight! Years slipped from him, and his youth surged up in all its warmth and eagerness. Why, he was a boy again! A boy at the threshold of life's wonderland. He was looking open-eyed into a garden of beauty where his foot had never trod. Mystic realms were there, mazes of fairy dreams, lights and colors he had never seen. At last the place of his desire was before him.

This other self, this woman, Lucy Webster,—the name brought with it an arresting chill that fell upon the fever of his passion with the breath of a glacier. The girl was a Webster! She was of the blood of those he scorned and hated; of a kin with an ancestry he had been brought up to loathe with all his soul. Had he not been taught that it was his mission to thwart and humble them? Had he not continually striven to do so? He must have been bewitched to have forgotten the fact for an in-

stant. No doubt this creature with her rare beauty was a decoy brought hither to tempt him to betray his heritage.

Ellen Webster was quite capable of formulating such a scheme and setting it in motion, if only for the cruel pleasure of seeing him ensnared in its toils. Perhaps even Luey herself was an accomplice in the plot. Who could tell? To be sure she appeared artless enough; but what Webster was to be trusted? And were she only the innocent tool of a more designing hand it redeemed her but little for, blameless or guilty, she was nevertheless a Webster. No power under heaven could wipe out her inheritance; for the penalty of her blood she must pay the price.

Ah, how near he had come to playing the fool! Was it not Delilah who had shorn Samson of his might? He, Martin Howe, to be false to his traditions, forfeit his pride, and become a spiritless weakling, forgetting his manhood in the smile of a woman!

"Bah!" He cried the word aloud into the teeth of the gale. To think he had almost walked blindfolded into the trap Ellen Webster had baited for him! Ah, she should see he was not to be enticed away from the strong-

hold of his principles by any such alluring snare.

What a sly old schemer Ellen was! She would have liked nothing better than to behold him on his knees at the feet of this niece of hers and then wreck his hopes by snatching away every possibility of their fulfillment. Perhaps she expected that with the girl's beauty as a bribe she could make him forget his dignity to the extent of rebuilding the wall.

She was mistaken! He was not to be thus cajoled. He had already, to some extent, betrayed his vows that night by befriending Lucy. Bitterly he repented of his weakness. Doubtless at this very moment Ellen Webster was exulting that he had so easily been duped and hoodwinked.

Hot anger sent the blood to his cheek. He had been blind to be thus caught off his guard. Into what madness had this woman beguiled him! Well, in the future the siren should chant her Lorelei songs to deaf ears. Her spell would be in vain.

He had found himself now. His wayward feet had recovered their stand upon the solid rock of principle, from which for the moment they had been tempted into straying. He

would demonstrate to this Lucy Webster that any friendliness between them was done and over.

What an ass a clever woman could make of a man! That any one could so circumvent him was unbelievable. Shaking the rain viciously from his umbrella, he mounted the steps, blew out the lantern, and stalked into the house.

Mary, Eliza, and Jane looked up expectantly as he entered. It was evident that a multitude of questions trembled on their lips.

He hoped they would offer an apology or explanation for their conduct and thereby furnish him with the opportunity for berating them and relieving his soul of the bitterness that rankled there. To lash somebody, anybody, with his tongue would have been a solace.

But although Jane faced him defiantly, and Mary and Eliza with anticipatory timidity, no one of the three spoke. They seemed to be waiting for him to strike the first blow. Twice he attempted it, assuming first an injured then an outraged attitude. But on second thought, he abandoned the attack. After all, what was there to say? Should he rail at them for asking Lucy to the house?

The fair face with its uplifted eyes came be-

fore his vision. No, he was not sorry the girl had come. Though he must never see her again, must never speak to her or touch her hand, he was glad he had been vouchsafed this one glimpse into Paradise.

He might forbid his sisters ever to have anything more to do with her. But he could not bring himself to do that either. And even suppose he were to make the demand. Jane might refuse to comply with it. There was mutiny in her eyes, a mutiny he might not be able to suppress unless he resorted to drastic measures; and, smarting as he was from the scorn and humiliation of his recent defeat, he was in no mood to cut himself off from the only sympathy within his reach by creating a breach between himself and his sisters.

Therefore he loitered self-consciously before the stove as if to dry his wet clothing and then ambled across the room, remarking in offhand fashion:

"It's settin' in for quite a rain."

"Yes, it's a hard shower," Mary ventured, turning a puzzled glance upon her brother. "We need it though."

"Yes, the ground was like chalk," agreed Martin.

Thrusting his hands into his trousers pockets, he took a few nervous strides around the room and, prompted by an impulse he could not have explained, he stopped and absently drew down the window shade on the side of the kitchen toward the Webster homestead.

"You didn't get any supper after all, did you, Martin?" Jane remarked presently. "Why don't you let me bring you a piece of fruit cake an' a glass of milk?"

"It would taste kinder good."

Although he had no wish for the food, the solicitude that accompanied the suggestion was just then very soothing.

"We could cook you somethin'," Jane said, rising.

"No, no," broke out the man impatiently. "Don't go fussin'. I don't want much. Just get me anything you have handy."

Jane went to the pantry and returned with two thick slices of "war cake" and a tumbler of creamy milk.

"This is the sort of cake you liked so much the other day," she said, putting it upon the table. "It's somethin' amazin' how it keeps moist. I s'pose it's the apple sauce in it."

She watched him while he broke it listlessly

into fragments. It was obvious that he was not hungry.

"You're tired, Martin," she murmured at last, in a gentle tone.

"I guess I am a little."

"The trip to the fair was a hard one, I'm afraid."

Again the man found comfort in her voice.

"Oh, no; not particularly hard," he answered with gruff kindness, "but the train was close an' dusty."

There was a quality in the tone that caused Jane to ponder. Furtively she studied the bowed head, the twitching fingers, the contracted brow; nor did the jaded, disheartened droop of the mouth escape her. She could not recall ever having seen Martin like this before.

Something must be weighing on his mind, something that had not been there when he had left home in the morning and had not been there when he returned. The shadow, whatever it was, had fallen since, and she felt it had some connection with the happenings of the evening. This unprecedented forbearance of his was a part of it. Of that she was sure. What did it portend? Was he angry? Or had Lucy Webster dropped some remark that

had shown him the folly and uselessness of his resentment? Jane would have given a great deal to know just what had occurred on that walk in the rain. Perhaps Lucy had openly attacked Martin's codes and forced a quarrel. She was fearless enough to do so; or perhaps she had simply reproached him and set him thinking.

Well, it was useless to ask questions. Jane knew her brother too well to presume to do this. If he had come to his senses, so much the better. It was not to be expected that he would admit it. That was not his way. Any change in his mental attitude would be quickly apparent, however, in his actions, his deeds confessing the faults his lips were too proud to utter. She must await developments.

Hence when he rose, she offered him her customary casual good night and listened to his slow tread upon the stairs. That unelastic step only served to further convince her that something recent and deep-acting had taken hold on the man and was tormenting him.

She was roused from her musings by Eliza's voice:

"What can be the matter with Martin?" she said in a tense whisper. "He never said

a word. Here I was shakin' in my shoes, dreadin' every minute to have him launch out in one of his tirades. You could 'a' knocked me over when he didn't do it."

"Maybe he's goin' to wait until to-morrow," Mary replied.

"No. He never waits," Eliza declared. "When he's mad he lets fly while his temper is up. You know that as well as I do. There's no coolin' off with him an' then warmin' up the leavin's of his rage the next mornin'. He believes in servin' things hot an' fresh."

"I never knew him to be so sort of cowed down," reflected Mary. "You don't s'pose he's sick, do you, Jane?"

Mary turned anxious eyes toward her sister.

"Of course not," Jane retorted promptly. "Don't go worryin', Mary, an' start to brew him some thoroughwort in the hope of havin' him down with a fever."

"I don't hope he'll have a fever," objected Mary in an injured tone.

Jane laughed.

"Now you know you'd love to have Martin sick so you could take care of him," said Jane provokingly. "Don't deny it."

"Jane Howe!"

"Well, you would. But he isn't sick, Mary. He's just tired. I wouldn't bother him about it if I was you. He hates bein' fussed over."

A sudden light of understanding had broken in on Jane's soul.

It came like a revelation, in an intuitive flash, backed neither by evidence nor by logic. Had she tried to give a reason for the astonishing conviction that overwhelmed her, she could not have done so. Nevertheless she was as certain of it as she was that the night would follow the day. Martin was neither hungry, angry, tired, worried, nor ill.

He was in love!

CHAPTER X

A TEMPTATION

Martin was indeed in love! Before a week had passed no one knew it better than he.

During the solitary hours when his hands were busy thinning lettuce or weeding young corn, his mind had abundant leisure for reflection, and the theme on which his thoughts turned with increasing activity was always the same. Defy Fate as he would, he faced the realization that he loved Lucy Webster with every fiber of his being.

It was a mad and hopeless affection,—one which, for the sake of his own peace of mind if for no other reason, it would be wiser to strangle at its birth. Nevertheless, he did not strangle it; on the contrary, he hugged the romance to his breast and fed it upon all the tender imaginings of a man's first dream of love, conjuring before his vision one empty fantasy after another.

It was evening, and under the silver light of a thin crescent hanging low in the heaven he paced beneath the trees, Lucy upon his arm. Or lovely with the freshness of early morning, she stood with him in the field, the brightness of her eyes as sparkling as the flash of the dew-drops on the grass. Again she came before him, gliding quietly amid a maze of humble domestic tasks, transforming each with the grace of her presence. Or perhaps she sat quietly watching the embers of a winter's fire that touched her hair to a glory of glinting copper.

But wherever she moved, the land upon which she trod was *his* land; the home where she toiled *his* home; the hearth that warmed her *his* hearth.

There were long hours when he was alone in the twilight with only his pipe for company, when through the smoke he seemed to see her close beside him. Sometimes she smiled down into his eyes; sometimes she raised her sweet lips to his; and once she came to him with madonna-like holiness, a sleeping child in her arms,—her child—and his.

Then Martin would rouse himself to find his pipe smoldering, the lamp dim, and the chill

of the night upon him. With an impatient shrug he would spring to his feet and tramp upstairs, hoping to find in slumber an escape from these fair but tormenting reveries. Sleep, however, came but fitfully, and even from the sacred confines of its privacy it was impossible to banish subconscious mirages of the day. There was no place to which he could flee where thoughts of Lucy Webster did not pursue him.

He saw her often now, very often, tripping buoyantly from house to barn, from barn to garden and back again, her round young arms bearing baskets of vegetables, or laden with shining milk pails.

How proud her head! How light her step!

One morning she skirted the wall so close that his whisper might have reached her had he chosen to speak. He could see the fringe of dark lashes against her skin, the rise and fall of her round bosom, the lilacs that filled her hands. But he did not speak and neither did she. In fact, she seemed not to see him, so busy was she toying with her flowers. She must be fond of flowers, for she was seldom without one tucked in her gown.

These glimpses, however, were fleeting, and

after he had yielded to the temptation of indulging in them he was wont to tax himself severely for his folly. Was he not already tortured with pain too poignant to be endured? Why rivet more tightly the fetters that goaded him?

He had fled once and for all from Circe's magic, vowing that never again should the sorceress work her charm upon him; and that vow he intended to keep. Nevertheless, it did not prevent him from stealing an occasional peep at the enchantress, if only to assure himself that her spell was as potent and deadly as he had supposed it. Surely, if he did not consort with her, looking could do no harm. Therefore he indulged his fancy, watching Lucy whenever she was within sight and each time becoming more helplessly entangled in her fascinations, until any escape from the thralldom of her beauty became impossible. His days were a cycle of tantalizing visions which ceased only with the coming of darkness; and when with the night he would have found release from their misery, it was only to discover that night an endless stretch of hours that intervened betwixt him and the moment when the visions might return again.

Poor Martin! He endured a hell of suffering during those radiant summer days. He was melancholy, ecstatic, irritable by turns, ascending to the heights and plunging into the depths with an abruptness and unaccountability that was not only enigmatic to himself but to every one else with whom he came in contact. He kept Mary in a ferment of excitement trying to devise remedies for his successive ills. One day she would be sure he needed a tonic to dispel his listlessness and with infinite pains would brew the necessary ingredients together; but before the draught could be cooled and administered, Martin had rebounded to an unheard-of vitality. Ah, she would reason, it must be his appetite that was at the bottom of the trouble. She must stimulate his desire for food. No sooner, however, was her concoction of herbs simmering on the stove than her erratic patient was devouring everything within sight with the zest of a cannibal. So it went, the affliction which oppressed him one day giving place to a new collection of symptoms on the morrow.

"I'd have Doctor Marsh to him if I had any opinion of the man," remarked Mary one night. "But I ain't ever been able to muster up my

respect for that critter's principles since he left that medicine for 'Liza marked '*Keep in a Dark Place.*' That was enough to shake my confidence in him forever. It was so underhanded. I'd rather had 'Liza sick for the rest of her life than that she should 'a' been dosed up on some stuff we had to keep hidden away lest somebody see it. If he was ashamed of the medicine, or it was anything we'd hadn't ought to had, he shouldn't 'a' given it to us. I never said nothin' to nobody 'bout it, but I poured the whole bottleful down the sink, and told Doctor Marsh that he needn't come again. He pretended he couldn't see why, but I guess he understood, an' I hope the lesson did him good," concluded Mary with righteous zeal.

"So that was the reason Doctor Marsh stopped comin'!" Jane exclaimed. "I always wondered. You never told me that before."

"No," said Mary with dignity, "I never did."

"But, Mary,"—Jane broke into a laugh.

"You needn't laugh, Jane. It was a very serious matter."

"If you'd only explained it, Mary, I could have told you ——"

"That is precisely why I didn't explain it,

Jane," Mary answered. "I knew you would interfere, an' I felt it was somethin' that laid between me an' my conscience. No matter what you'd 'a' said, I should 'a' felt the same way about it. Matters of right an' wrong are the affairs of me an' my Maker. Nobody else on earth can settle 'em."

There were instances when it was useless to argue with Mary, and Jane saw that this was one of them.

Had she so willed she could not only have cleared up the mystery about Doctor Marsh's medicine, but she could have furnished her sister with the key to Martin's caprices, and thereby saved the metaphysician not only much worry but also much physical labor.

Mary and Eliza, however, lived in such a miniature world that Jane knew if Martin's secret were divulged it would become the unending topic of conversation from that moment on. Moreover, so intense would be his sisters' excitement concerning the affair, and so keen their interest and curiosity that they might blunder into destroying the delicate fabric of the romance altogether. Hence Jane kept her own council, speculating with amusement as to how long it would be before his two solicitous

but blinded relatives should stumble upon the truth.

In the meantime the neighboring between the two families, so bravely begun, was not continued. Mary and Eliza Howe had not the courage or the initiative to attempt a second clandestine tea-party, much as they would have enjoyed it; and Jane saw no use in urging Lucy to the house. If Martin decreed to further the affair, he was quite capable of doing so without any aid of hers; and if he ordained to abandon it, as he evidently did, wild horses could not turn him from his purpose. Therefore Jane gave up all her aggressive attempts to heal the breach between Howe and Webster, and contented herself with waving to Lucy over the wall and calling a cheery greeting to the girl whenever she came within hailing distance.

Lucy was disappointed by this retreat of her neighbors into their former aloofness. Of course their action was traceable to Martin. It was his fault. No doubt he had gone home and berated his sisters for their friendliness and had so intimidated them that they had no choice but to bow to his will. Jane was the only one of them anyway who had the spirit to defy her

brother, and presumably she had decided that the game was not worth the candle. Perhaps, too, she was right. To live in a daily purgatory made of life a sorry existence. She herself had found that out.

Her aunt was continually becoming more irritable and less sound of judgment, and there were times when Lucy feared that the warped mind would give way under the strain of repeated paroxysms of anger. Could Ellen have been persuaded to surrender the management of her affairs entirely into her niece's hands, she might have been spared much annoyance; but frail as she was, she persisted in retaining to the last her scepter of supremacy.

She went each day into the garden and put Tony out of humor by finding fault with everything he did; having demoralized his temper, she would return to the house to rasp Lucy's patience by heaping upon the girl's blameless head such remnants of wrath as she still cherished toward the long-suffering Portugese.

For sometime she had contented herself with this daily programme, not varying it by venturing away from the place, even to carry her garden truck to market. Therefore Lucy was

astounded when one morning her aunt appeared at breakfast, dressed in her shabby black cashmere and wearing her cameo pin, and announced she was going to drive to town.

"I've an errand to do," she said without preamble, "an' I shan't be home till noon. You needn't go falutin' over to the Howes', neither, the minute my back is turned, as you did the last time I went off."

Lucy smiled good-humoredly.

"I'm goin' to see a lawyer," her aunt went on. "Lawyer Benton."

No reply appearing necessary, Lucy did not speak.

"Well!" piped Ellen, after waiting a moment.

"Well, what?" Lucy asked.

"Ain't you got no interest in what I'm goin' for?" the woman demanded querulously.

"I'm always interested in anything you wish to tell me," answered the girl, "but I thought it was not my place to inquire into your business."

"It is my business, an' I can keep it to myself," said Ellen tartly. "But I'll tell you this much—I'm goin' to get my will made."

The hard blue eyes fixed themselves on Lucy's face narrowly.

"My will!" repeated Ellen, a challenge in her tone. "I s'pose you thought it was all made long ago; but it warn't. I'm goin' to make it to-day."

At a loss how to reply, Lucy nodded.

"You don't seem much concerned 'bout it," observed her aunt peevishly. "Ain't you curious to know who I'm goin' to leave my property to?"

"No."

"You ain't!"

"No."

"S'pose I was to give it all to you."

"That would be very kind."

"Yes, it would be—it would be kind," agreed Ellen. "But mebbe I ain't a-goin' to. Mebbe I'm goin' to will it to somebody else."

"That's your affair."

"I'll bet, for all your indifference, you'd be mad as a wet hen if I was to leave it to somebody else," went on the woman provokingly.

"No, I shouldn't. Why should I?"

"'Cause you're my next of kin. By rights it had oughter come to you, hadn't it?"

"I don't know the New Hampshire laws."

With an admiring glance at her niece, Ellen broke into an unpleasant laugh.

"There's no trappin' you, Miss Lucy Webster, is there?" she exclaimed, rising from her chair and clapping on her hat. "You're a cute one, an awful cute one!"

"Why?"

"Oh, you don't need to be told," chuckled Ellen. "Anybody as cute as you are, *knows.*"

With that she was gone.

All the morning the girl busied herself within doors, exchanging one duty for another. Toward noon, however, she made an excursion to the garden for lettuce and radishes. Her pathway lay close to the wall, and on her return to the house she was amazed to see lying on the topmost stone of the ruined heap a mammoth bunch of sweet peas. There was no mistaking the fact that the flowers were intended for her, for her name had been hastily scrawled on a bit of crumpled paper and placed beside them. Nothing could have surprised her more than to stumble upon this offering.

Evidently the blossoms had just been gathered, for the raindrops of the previous night still sparkled among their petals, jeweling with brilliancy their kaleidoscopic riot of color.

She caught them up with delight, burying her face in their cool fragrance. Where had they come from? She knew no one who raised sweet peas,—no one except the Howes, and of course —— she halted and blushed. Could it have been the Howes?

"*Mary's are white,*" she heard herself automatically repeating in Jane's phrases. "*'Liza's pink, an' mine are purple. Martin has his in another place, 'cause he likes all the colors mixed together. But he never picks his nor lets us. He says he likes to see 'em growin'.*"

And now, by some miracle, here were the blossoms of Martin's raising, their prismatic tints exquisite as a sunset. It was like holding the rainbow in one's hands. She knew the Howes too well to cherish for an instant the illusion that any of the three sisters had cut the flowers from the vines. They would not have dared. No. No hand but Martin's had plucked them.

With a strange fluttering of her heart, Lucy carried the bouquet to her own room, a corner of the house where Ellen seldom intruded. There she bent over it with a happy, triumphant little smile. Then, from behind the shelter of the muslin curtain, she blew a kiss from her

finger tips to Mr. Martin Howe, who was hoeing potatoes on the hill, with his back set squarely toward the Webster mansion.

When Ellen returned at noon, there was still a shell-like flush of pink on the girl's cheek and on her lips a smile for which her aunt could not account.

"Where you been?" inquired the woman suspiciously.

"Nowhere. Why?"

"You look as if somebody'd sent you a Christmas tree full of presents."

Lucy laughed softly.

"You ain't been to the Howes'?"

"I haven't been anywhere," repeated Lucy, throwing up her chin. "I'm telling the truth."

Ellen eyed her shrewdly.

"Yes, I reckon you are," she observed slowly. "I ain't never caught you lyin' yet." Then as if an afterthought had occurred to her, she added: "Likely you've been thinkin' 'bout the will I've been makin'."

She saw Lucy open her lips, then close them.

"I've got it all done," went on Ellen audaciously. "It's drawn up, signed, an'

sealed. In fact, I brought it home with me. Here it is."

Tossing a large white envelope fastened with a splash of red wax upon the table, she peered at her niece.

"I'm goin' to give it to you to keep," continued she in a hectoring tone. "It'll be like havin' Pandora's box around. You can't open it, an' you'll have the continual fun of wonderin' what's inside."

"I'd rather not take it."

"But I want you to," asserted Ellen. "I'm givin' it to you to take care of. It'll help to make life interestin'. Besides, who knows but you may be tempted to break it open some night an' have a peep inside."

Craftily the old woman watched the girl.

"Or mebbe you'll tear it up," she mused. "Who knows? Then if I was to die, you could pretend I hadn't made no will."

"Take it back. I shan't keep it," Lucy cried, moving toward the door.

"Afraid of yourself, eh?"

"No."

The monosyllable rang with scorn.

"Then prove it," sneered Ellen.

"Give it to me."

Smiling evilly, her aunt pushed the packet across the table. There was a leer of triumph in the sharp-featured face.

"I 'magine that 'twas gettin' as mad as you are now that kep' the Websters from ever buildin' up that wall," she called after her niece, as Lucy with crimson cheeks fled up the stairs, the long white envelope in her hand.

CHAPTER XI

THE CROSSING OF THE RUBICON

"I WANT you should go to the village to-day," announced Ellen, making her appearance in Lucy's room on a hot August morning a few weeks later. "Tony's got to get the scythe mended an' have Dolly shod. Don't it beat all how somethin's always wearin' out? Long's he's goin', you might's well drive along with him an' take the eggs an' corn I promised Elias Barnes. There's some more errands at the store I want done, too."

"All right, Aunt Ellen."

But the woman loitered.

"If you don't want to hang 'round town till Tony gets ready to come back, mebbe you could find somebody comin' this way who would give you a lift home. It seems sort of a shame to stay there wastin' the time you could be usin' here."

Lucy smiled at the characteristic remark.

"An' if you didn't happen on any one," went

on Ellen, "likely you wouldn't mind walkin'; 'twould get you home quicker."

"No, indeed. I always like a walk."

"I reckon 'twill be warm."

"I don't mind."

"That's good."

Ellen was always gracious when her plans went to her satisfaction.

"I want you to be ready to start right after breakfast," she added, as she went out the door. "The earlier you get off the earlier you'll be back again. I wish I could go myself an' dicker with Elias. I would if it warn't that I have to tinker with that pesky cream separator."

"Is the cream separator out of order?"

"Yes," said Ellen wearily. "Trust that Tony to bust everythin' he touches."

She closed Lucy's door with a spirited bang.

The girl listened to her retreating footsteps and smiled softly. It was nothing new for Ellen to be sending her to the village to transact the business she no longer felt able to attend to herself, but the subterfuges to which she resorted to conceal her real motive were amusing. Lucy knew well that to-day, if it had not been the cream separator, something

else equally important would have furnished the excuse for keeping her aunt at home. It seemed so foolish not to be honest about the matter. To pursue any other method, however, would have been quite foreign to Ellen's policy, and therefore Lucy, although not blinded by these devices to hide the truth, always pretended she was, and earnestly condoned with the old woman about the rebellious potato sprayer, the obstinate pump, or whatever other offending object chanced to be selected as the plea for casting her cares on younger shoulders.

The trip to the village was tiresome; of that there was no doubt,—especially on a day that promised to be as hot as this one. Already tremors of heat vibrated upward in waves from the piazza roof, and the sun's scorching rays pierced between the closed blinds. Nevertheless, Lucy did not regret the prospect of the morning's excursion. She so seldom had an opportunity to leave the house that any break in the monotony of her days, uncomfortable though it might be, was a welcome diversion.

Therefore she hurried her dressing and breakfast, and while dawn was still on the threshold, set off with Tony in the dust-covered

surrey that creaked its way along behind the stumbling gray mare.

The coolness of night was over the awakening earth, although the mounting sun was speedily drinking up the dew and rousing the locusts into droning song. Not a leaf stirred. Through the shimmering atmosphere the valley, with its river yellow as a band of molten gold, lay listless in drowsy haze; but the birds, butterflies, and bees flitted among the flowers that bordered the roadside with an alertness which proved that they, at least, felt no lessening of zest for their honey gathering.

"It's goin' to be an almighty hot day," observed Tony who, after slapping Dolly's broad back several times with the reins, had decided that further attempts to accelerate the mare's pace was useless.

"Yes, very hot."

"I hope your aunt won't go pullin' that separator all to pieces while we're gone," the boy grumbled. "In the first place she ain't got a notion of how to put it together again; an' in the next place she ain't fit to go liftin' an' haulin' things about the way she does. She's gettin' to be an old woman. Ain't she most eighty?"

" She's not far from it," answered Lucy.

" Well, if I was her age an' had her money, you wouldn't see me workin' as if a slave driver was standin' over me," the Portuguese lad declared. " What good is it doin' her bein' rich, I'd like to know."

" Oh, I don't think she is rich," said Lucy quickly.

" Folks say she is; that's all I know 'bout it," replied Tony. " Elias Barnes was calculatin' one day down to the store that she must be worth thousands. I can believe it, too," added the boy significantly. " Everything we've got on the farm is tied up with string, or hitched together with a scrap of wire. Your aunt ain't fur gettin' a thing mended long's it can be made to hold together. 'Bout everything on the farm wants overhaulin'. I'd give a fortune to see a smart man come in here an' set the place to rights. There's a lot of truck in the barn oughter be heaved out an' burned. 'Tain't fit for nothin'. But Miss Webster would no more hear to partin' with one stick nor stone she owned than she'd cut off her head. She'd keep everything that belonged to her if it was dropping to bits."

The boy paused.

"Well, there's one good thing," he added, smiling, "she can't take the stuff she's hoarded with her into the next world, an' when it falls to you you can do as you like with it."

"Falls to me?"

"Why, yes. 'Course all your aunt's property'll be yours some day."

"What makes you think so?" Lucy asked, a suggestion of reserve in her tone.

"Who else is there to have it?" inquired Tony, opening his eyes very wide. "Ain't she already left it to you in her will?"

"I don't know."

"You don't!"

Lucy laughed at his incredulousness.

"No."

"Well, they say down to the town that your aunt made her will 'bout three weeks ago. Even Lawyer Benton himself admitted that much. Folks saw Miss Webster goin' into his office an' questioned him. He warn't for tellin' anything 'til they nagged at him; then he did own that the farm an' everything else was left to *relatives*. Elias Barnes an' some of the others were mighty quick to hunt up who the Webster relatives were. They were pretty sure you were the only one, an' it 'pears

you are. So it's you will get the place an' the money, an' goodness knows, Miss Lucy, you've earnt it. The men all agreed to that."

"You know, Tony, Miss Webster is my aunt," began Lucy in a warning voice, loyalty resenting this criticism.

"Yes, but there's aunts—an' aunts," interrupted the lad with a grin. "It's no use pretendin' you ain't drawn the devil of a one, 'cause I know. Don't I live close at hand, an' ain't I got eyes?"

Lucy did not answer. They were nearing the village and to put an end to the conversation, she took out her list of errands and began to read it absently. But in the back of her mind she was turning over Tony's remarks. She had never allowed herself to dwell on the time when the Webster homestead would actually be her own. It seemed unfitting to plan on acquiring property that could only come to her through the death of another person. Now, however, she suddenly gave her imagination rein and began to consider what changes she would make when the farm was really in her hands.

The barn must be cleared out the first thing and be re-shingled. Then she would strip the

farm of its litter of rubbish and repair some of the tools and household furniture. What a delight it would be to renovate the old home with chintz hangings and fresh paint and paper! There were great possibilities for making the interior of the house attractive on a small expenditure of money. The time-worn mahogany was good, the proportions of the rooms pleasing, and the great fireplaces, several of which were now boarded up, were a distinct asset.

Of course she would have to have help with the work. It would be well to get a capable man to manage the garden for her—some strong, intelligent person, familiar with the problems of soil, fertilizer, and horticulture; a person, for example, like, well—like Martin Howe. A flood of color crept into her cheek.

Although she had never addressed a remark to Martin since the night when he had abandoned her at the foot of the Howe driveway to face the onslaughts of that drenching storm, she was perfectly aware that her goings and comings had become a matter of no little concern to the austere gentleman who dwelt on the other side of the wall. That he watched her she knew, for she had been feminine enough to

trap him into changing his position that he might keep her in view.

Besides, was there not the miraculous bunch of flowers? She had, to be sure, never acknowledged them even by the lifting of an eyelash, nor had she proof that Martin's hand had really put them within her reach; nevertheless, she could have staked her oath upon it.

Once she had almost defied his silence by thanking him; in fact, she had actually ventured to the confines of the Webster land with this intention; but on arriving within range of his presence, her courage had deserted her. He looked so forbidding that a foolish agitation had swept over her, and compelled her to drop her eyes, and walk away in silence.

She had never known herself to be so nervous before. One would almost think she was afraid of Martin Howe. How absurd! He was nothing to her, less than nothing.

If she liked to study his fine, athletic figure and the free swing of his magnificent body as he worked, it was solely from an æsthetic standpoint. One seldom had an opportunity to see a man as perfectly molded as he. His face was interesting, too; not handsome, perhaps, but attractive. It was a pity it was so

stern and set, for she was sure he could smile if he chose; indeed he had smiled that night when he had come home and been unconscious of her presence in the house. It had been a compelling smile, charming for its very rareness. She had often thought of it since and wished she might behold it again. Of course she never would. Yet it would be pleasant to do so. Probably he smiled often at home,—even laughed sometimes. How she would like to hear him laugh,—just once.

He was a very fascinating person,—purely as a character study, of course, nothing more. Since, however, she was indulging in speculations concerning him, it would be amusing to know what he thought of her; for he did think of her, that was obvious. What motive prompted him to do it? Perhaps he admired her, thought her pretty. If he did, why didn't he make some further effort to talk with her? Usually men were only too eager to improve the acquaintance of girls they liked. It surely could do Mr. Martin Howe no harm to call a good morning to her over the wall, as his sisters did, even if he did deplore the existence of the Websters.

Then the tenor of Lucy's arguments shifted.

Probably Martin neither admired nor liked her. Doubtless, along with her aunt and all that pertained to the hated blood, he despised her and simply watched her in disgust. But if so, why did he bother to send flowers to her?

Lucy shook her head. She was back at the point from which she had started and was no nearer a solution of Martin Howe and his baffling mental outlook. What did it matter anyway? What he thought or felt was no concern of hers, and she was silly to burden her mind with speculations that really interested her so little.

By this time Tony, who had lapsed into a silence as unbroken as her own, drew up at the smooth stone flagging before Elias Barnes's store and, leaping out over the wheel, helped his companion to dismount from the wagon and unload the farm produce they had brought with them for sale.

"I'll get home somehow, Tony," the girl said to him, as he prepared to drive off. "You needn't come for me."

"All right, Miss Lucy, only I do hope you won't have to foot it back in this heat."

"I shan't mind."

"It's going to be a terrible day," insisted the

lad. "Them buzzin' locusts is enough to prove that. They're good as a thermometer."

Lucy laughed.

"Don't worry about me," she remarked kindly. "Just as soon as I finish my errands I shall start home."

"You'd be wise to."

As the mare scuffed off down the road, amid a cloud of dust, Lucy entered the store.

A stuffy odor of coffee, molasses, and calico greeted her; so, too, did Elias Barnes, who came forward from behind the counter, extending his damp and sticky palm and showing every tooth that an expansive smile permitted.

"So it's you, Miss Lucy," he observed with pleasure. "I was expecting to see your aunt. She was here the other day."

"Yes, she drove to town last Friday."

"Came on an interestin' errand, too," chirped Elias. "Leastwise, I 'magine 'twas interestin' to you." He grinned slyly.

"Why?"

"Why?" repeated the man, taken aback. "Because—well, ain't such things always interestin'?"

"What things?"

Elias stared, uncertain as to how to proceed.

Was it possible the girl was ignorant of her aunt's mission?

"Mebbe you didn't know Miss Webster's errand in town," he began eagerly.

"I know she went to see Mr. Benton and get her will made, if that is what you mean."

"An' don't you call that interestin'?" demanded the discomfited Elias.

"Not particularly."

The storekeeper gasped.

"Likely the matter was all cut an' dried an' nothin' new to you," persisted he, with a wan, disappointed smile. "There warn't much choice left your aunt, fur as relatives went, was there? Still, I reckon she couldn't 'a' found a better one to pass her property on to than you," concluded the man with a leer.

"What makes you so sure she has passed it on to me?" inquired Lucy, annoyed.

"Well, ain't she?"

"I don't know."

"You don't—by thunder! She ain't told you nothin'?"

"Certainly not."

Elias looked puzzled.

"Why," he said, "most folks thought that

was the condition that brought you to Sefton Falls. Surely nothin' but some sort of a reward, an' a big one, too, would coax a body to come an' live with such a ——"

"You forget you are speaking of my aunt, Mr. Barnes."

"I guess I did forget it a mite, Miss Lucy," mumbled Elias awkwardly. "I beg your pardon."

The girl inclined her head.

"Suppose we leave personal matters now and settle our business," she answered, motioning toward the boxes, baskets, and egg cases Tony had set inside the shop door. "Here is the corn and the butter my aunt promised you, and here are twelve dozen eggs. If you will pay me for them, I will start back home before it grows any warmer."

"Lemme see," ruminated Elias, "eggs is bringing ——"

"Seventy cents."

"Ain't it sixty-nine?"

"No."

"I seem to have sixty-nine fixed awful firm in my head," protested Elias tenaciously.

Lucy laughed.

"You'll have to get it out then," she retorted

good-humoredly, "for seventy cents is the market price."

The firm answer told the shopkeeper that further bickering would be useless.

"Seventy cents then," he said reluctantly, opening his cash drawer. "It's robbery, though."

"You're not often robbed, Mr. Barnes."

"Ain't I? Well, if I ain't, it's 'cause folks know better than to try to do me. 'Tain't often I'm beat in a bargain—only when I'm dealin' with a pretty woman an' give her the advantage." Again he displayed his rows of teeth. "Ladies first is my motto; an' heiresses ——"

"You haven't paid me for the corn or butter yet," cut in Lucy impatiently. "Five dozen ears of early corn and ten pounds of print butter."

For a second time Elias took from an infinitesimal crack in his money drawer another handful of change which he grudgingly counted into the girl's extended hand.

"There you are!" he asserted, as if wiping some disagreeable thought triumphantly from his memory. "Now we're square an' can talk of somethin' else."

"I'm afraid I can't stop to talk to-day, Mr. Barnes, for I've got to get home. Good-by and thank you," and with a smile that dazzled the confounded storekeeper, Lucy sped out the door.

Elias, who was a widower and "well-to-do," was considered the catch of the town and was therefore unaccustomed to receiving such scant appreciation of his advances.

"I'll be buttered!" he declared, chagrined. "If she ain't gone!"

Lucy was indeed far down the level road, laughing to herself as she thought of the discomfited Elias. This was not the first time he had shown an inclination to force his oily pleasantries upon her; but it was the first time she had so pointedly snubbed him.

"I hope it will do him good," she murmured half aloud. "I'd like to convince him that every woman in Sefton Falls isn't his for the asking."

As she went on her way between the bordering tangle of goldenrod and scarlet-tinted sumach, she was still smiling quietly. The sun had risen higher, and a dry heat rose in waves from the earth. Already her shoes were white,

and moist tendrils of hair curled about her brow. Before her loomed three miles of parching highway as barren of shade as the woodsman's axe could make it. The picture of Ellen's cool kitchen and breezy porch made the distance at that moment seem interminable. There was not a wagon in sight, and unless one came along, she would have to trudge every step of the way home.

Well, there was no use in becoming discouraged at the outset of her journey, and she was not, although she did halt a moment to draw a crisp, white handkerchief from her pocket and fan her burning cheeks. She had no idea the walk was going to be so hot a one. Despite her aunt's objections, she almost wished she had waited for Tony. If only she could have the good luck to be overtaken by somebody! Hark, did she hear wheels?

Yes, as good fortune would have it, from around the curve in the road behind her a wagon was coming into sight, the measured *clop, clop* of the horse's feet reaching her distinctly. The cloud of dust that enveloped the approaching Jehu made it impossible for her to see who he was; nevertheless, it did not much matter, for country etiquette stipulated that

those traveling on foot were always welcome to the hospitality of a passing vehicle.

Therefore Lucy sat down on the wall to await her oncoming rescuer.

Meanwhile the wagon came nearer.

It contained a single occupant who was perched with careless grace astride a barrel of flour and appeared to be very much hedged in by a multifarious assortment of small packages and sacks of grain. It did not look as if there were room in the carriage for an additional ounce, and when the girl saw how crowded it was, her heart sank; then as she looked again, it bounded with sudden emotion, for the man who so jauntily urged forward his steed from his pinnacle on the barrel was none other than Martin Howe.

Resolutely Lucy rose from the wall and, without a glance in the traveler's direction, set out at a sharp pace along the highway.

She would not ask a favor of Martin Howe if she had to plod every step of the three scorching miles; and if he were brute enough to let her toil along in the heat—to walk while he rode—well, that was all she ever wanted to know about him. Her heart beat tumultuously as she heard the wheels coming closer.

The horse was beside her now, and the whirlwind of dust his hoofs raised made her choke. Would the wagon stop or go on? The horse's head passed abreast of her, then his white, lathered body. Next the wagon came into sight, with Martin sitting proudly and stiffly on his perch. Afterward horse, wagon, and man rolled past, and the girl was left alone.

Her lip trembled. Would he really leave her like this in the dust and heat? Would he leave even his worst enemy? It was incredible a human being could be so heartless. And the humiliation of it! To tag along behind him on foot, smothering in his dust!

Rage possessed her. That should be the end of Mr. Martin Howe! He was no gentleman. He was not even human.

She sat down on the stone wall once more, waiting for him to disappear and the dust from his wheels settle.

But to her surprise she saw him come to a stop in the road and, pivoting around on his perch, face her.

Lucy did not move. She watched him hesitate, waver, then dismount and come back through the dust.

"If you're on your way home ——" he began with clumsy gravity.

The girl smiled up into his face.

"If you're goin' back ——" he repeated, and again got no further.

She came to his rescue.

"Have you room to take me in?"

"There ain't much room." She saw the flicker of a smile shadow his face. "Still, if you don't mind bein' a mite cramped ——"

"I don't mind it at all unless it crowds you too much," answered Lucy. "It is very kind of you." Then she heard herself add without forethought: "I was afraid you were goin' by."

"I ain't that much of a heathen, I hope," Martin returned gruffly.

Although it was plain he was ill at ease, he helped her into the wagon, arranging the bags of meal solicitously that she might be as comfortable as possible. Then he touched the horse with his whip, and they started off.

"I'm so thankful to have a ride home," sighed Lucy, after waiting a second or two and finding he had no intention of speaking. "It is very hot to-day."

"So 'tis. But it is great weather for corn."

"I suppose so," assented the girl. "How is yours coming on?"

"Pretty well. Some blasted crow got a little of it at the beginnin'; but the rest of it is all right."

"It was a shame you lost any of it."

"I was a good deal put out myself. Still, 'twarn't much, considerin' the size of the field."

Lucy dimpled.

"Your field is a wonderful sight from our house," she answered, "especially when the wind blows. You have a fine lot of oats, too. I love to watch the breeze sweep across it."

"I do myself," agreed Martin with increasing cordiality. "It's a pretty picture. There's lots of pretty pictures on a farm if you're lookin' for 'em," he added, stealing a glance at her.

"Your sweet peas were a pretty picture," ventured Lucy mischievously.

Martin colored with confusion. He seemed at a loss how to reply. Then, gathering courage, he remarked shyly:

"You like flowers?"

"I love them!"

"Some folks do," said he hurriedly. "I prefer to see 'em growin'."

"Yet you do cut them sometimes," persisted Lucy playfully.

"Mighty seldom. Only when it's good for the vines."

Again the glint of a smile brightened his countenance, and she saw him blush sheepishly.

"I wish it would be good for them again sometime," said she, peeping up into his eyes. "Don't you think there's danger of their goin' to seed?"

She heard a short laugh, but he did not answer. Instead, as if to change a dangerous topic, he asked:

"How are you likin' Sefton Falls?"

"Oh, I think the place is beautiful. Already I have become very fond of it. You must love every stick and stone within sight."

"There was one while I didn't," Martin drawled slowly. "But afterward, when I saw 'twas my duty to stay here, I got to feelin' different. I'd 'a' liked to have gone to the war. I was too old, though; besides, I had my sisters."

"I know," murmured Lucy with quiet sympathy. "You see, I had to make my choice, too. My aunt wrote that she needed me. It

wouldn't have been right for me to desert her and go to France to nurse other people."

"So it's because of her you're stayin' here?"

"Yes."

Martin did not speak again for some time; then he said in a tense, uneven voice that struggled to be casual:

"If she was to die then, I s'pose you'd start back West where you came from."

"I'm—not—sure."

He waited as if expecting her to explain herself, and presently she did so.

"I might decide to make my home here," she went on. "That is, if I could get some one to help me with the farm."

There was no intimation of coquetry in the remark; merely simple fact. But the words wrought a miracle in the face of the man beside her.

"Do you like it that much?" he demanded eagerly.

"I love it!"

"Miss Webster has a fine place," ventured Martin at length.

"Both of them are fine old places."

He nodded.

"But yours has been kept up better than

ours," continued Lucy. "You see, Aunt Ellen isn't strong like a man; and besides, she hasn't studied into new ways of doing things as you have. That's the interesting part of farming, I think, to use your brains and make two things grow where only one grew before. If I were a man ——"

She broke off, embarrassed by her own girlish enthusiasm.

"What would you do?" inquired Martin eagerly.

"I'd do with our farm what you've done with yours. I'd get new tools, and I'd find out how to use them. It would be fascinating. But a woman can't ——"

"She can read just the same."

"I haven't a man's strength," returned Lucy, shaking her head gravely. "It's such a pity."

"Maybe not."

The words slipped from his lips before it was possible for him to recover them. He flushed.

"What!" exclaimed Lucy.

"Maybe it's as well for you to stay as you were made," he explained in a strangely gentle voice.

The girl turned her head away. They had

reached the foot of the Webster driveway, and unbidden the horse halted. But as Lucy prepared to climb out of the wagon, the man stayed her.

"I reckon there's some place I could turn round, ain't there, if I was to drive in?" he said recklessly.

"Oh, there's plenty of room," Lucy answered, "only hadn't you better drop me here? My—my—aunt is at home."

"I don't care," Martin retorted with the same abandon. "I ain't goin' to have you plod up that long driveway in the broilin' sun —aunt or no aunt."

He laughed boyishly.

"It's awfully good of you. But please, if you mind coming, don't; for indeed I ——"

"You ain't your aunt," asserted Martin with a shy glance into her face.

Lucy met the glance with a blush and a whimsical smile.

"No, I'm not," she responded, "and sometimes I wish you weren't your father and your grandfather."

"What do you mean?"

"Because if you were just *you,* you'd be more forgiving—I know you would."

She saw him bite his lips and a dull red tinge his cheek. Without answering he turned into the long avenue and presently drew up before the side door.

"There you are!" he remarked stiffly.

Lucy did not need to look at him to sense that the kindliness had left his countenance, and his jaw had become grim and set.

Had she been able to read his thoughts, she would have realized that the short detour into Ellen Webster's territory had brought Martin to himself, and that he was already deploring with inward scorn the weakness that had led him to do the thing he had pledged his word never to do. He could not even shunt off the blame for his act and say, as did his illustrious ancestor: "The woman tempted me and I did eat." No, he had open-eyed stalked voluntarily into temptation,—willingly, gladly, triumphantly. He had sinned against his conscience, his traditions, his forbears, and behold, angry as he was with himself for yielding to it, the sin was sweet.

CHAPTER XII

THE TEST

Martin had guided his horse round the triangle of sweet-williams and, still torn by conflicting emotions of ecstasy and self-reproach, was proceeding down the driveway when a cry of distress reached his ear:

"Martin—Mr. Howe!"

He turned to see Lucy Webster beckoning frantically to him from the door.

"Come back, please," she cried. "Hurry!"

That she was excited was evident. Indeed she must have been quite out of her mind to have called him Martin in that shameless fashion. The fact that the name had slipped so spontaneously from her lips and that she hastened to correct her mistake caused the man to speculate with delight as to whether she was wont to think of him by this familiar cognomen. This thought, however, was of minor importance, the flash of an instant. What

chiefly disturbed Martin was the girl's agitation.

Bringing his horse to a stop, he sped back to where she was standing, and on reaching her side he was startled to see that the face but a short interval before so radiant had blanched to a deathly pallor.

"My aunt!" she whispered in a frightened tone. "Something terrible has happened to her!"

If Lucy entertained any doubts as to whether he would aid her in the present emergency she had either cast them aside or was determined to ignore such a possibility, for she held the door open with the obvious expectation that he would follow her into the house.

A year ago, a month, nay—a week, he would never have consented to cross the Webster threshold, let alone offer any assistance to its mistress; but the siren who beckoned him on had cast such a potent spell over his will that now without open protest, although with a certain inward compunction, he followed her through the hall into the kitchen.

Upon the floor was stretched Ellen Webster —crumpled, helpless, inert—her eyes closed

and her stern face set as in a death mask. How long she had lain there it was impossible to tell. If she had called for succor it had been to empty walls.

As with mingled sensations Martin stood looking down upon her unconscious form, Lucy threw herself upon her knees beside the woman and gently touched her wrists and heart.

"She isn't dead," she murmured presently. "She must either have had a fall or some sort of shock. We must get her upstairs and send for a doctor."

The "*we*" told Martin that the girl had not even considered the chance of his refusing to come to her assistance.

"Tony is in the village," she went on, "and I don't know what I should have done but for you. How fortunate that you were here!"

Was it fortunate? Martin asked himself.

At last the moment for which he had longed and prayed had come,—the moment when the fate of his enemy lay in his hands, and it was within his power to grant or deny succor. There had never been a question in his mind what he would do should this opportunity arise. Had he not declared over and over again that

Ellen Webster might die before he would lift a finger to help her? He had meant it too. All the bitterness of his soul had gone into the vow. And now here he was confronted by the very emergency he had craved from Fortune. The woman he hated was at his mercy. What should he do? Should he stand stanchly by his word and let her life go out into the Beyond when he might perhaps stay its flight? Or should he weakly repudiate his word and call her from the borderland to continue to taunt and torment him? If a doctor were not summoned quickly she might die, and her death be upon his soul. Did he wish to stain himself with this crime,—for crime it would be. Was the revenge worth the hours of self-condemnation that might follow? Who was he that he should judge Ellen Webster and cut off her life before its time? Vengeance is mine: I will repay, saith the Lord.

The phrase rang insistently in Martin's ears. He tried to stifle it—ignore it—but still the assertion continued to repeat itself within his consciousness. Suppose, tempted by his weaker nature and the appealing eyes of Lucy, he were to yield to his better self and adopt a merciful attitude, might not Ellen be restored

to health and jeer at him to the end of his days for his magnanimity? Hers was not the creed "If thine enemy hunger." She would call him coward and accuse him of a feeble, intimidated will. Were the case to be reversed, she would never curb her hatred to prolong his existence; of that he was certain. He could see her now bending over him, her thumb turned down with the majestic fearlessness of a Cæsar. She would term her act justice, and she would carry out the sentence without a tremor.

But now that the same chance had come to him, and he saw the old woman stretched before him, her thin white hair snowy against the wooden flooring, a vague pity stirred in his heart. Death must come to us all sometime; but how tragic to have its approach unheralded, granting not an instant in which to raise a prayer to Heaven. No, he could not let his worst foe go down to the grave thus. He was the captain of his own soul, but not of Ellen Webster's.

He glanced up to find Lucy's gaze fixed upon him. There was horror and anguish in her eyes, and he realized that she had read aright the temptation that assailed him. She did not speak, she seemed scarcely to breathe:

but the pleading face told him that should he yield to his darker passions and show no pity, she would forever loathe him for his cruelty. Plainly as he saw this, however, it was not to her silent entreaty that he surrendered. Something deeper than love was calling him.

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not charity——" How persistently the sentences came to him! They seemed to echo from out his memory—in his mother's voice—the voice of a vanished past. She had taught him the words when he was a boy, and he had not thought of them since. Why did they now surge into his mind to weaken his resolve and cause him to waver in his intention? He wished he could get away from Lucy's eyes and the sight of the woman upon the floor. Had his mother lived, she might sometime have been as frail as this and had hair as white. A sob broke from him, and he stooped over his fallen foe.

"Where do you want I should carry her?" he asked, raising the limp body in his arms.

Lucy did not answer at once, and when she did her reply was unsteady.

"The room is at the head of the stairs," she said, struggling to speak in her customary tone. "Maybe I'd better go first."

The hushed intimacy of the tragedy suddenly brought the man and the woman very close together.

She led the way and he followed with his helpless burden. The form he bore was not heavy. In fact, it was so fragile that it seemed impossible that it could harbor so much venom and hatred.

Ellen Webster was, after all, nothing but an old, old woman. Perhaps, he reflected, in a wave of regret, he should have realized this and made allowance for it. Then a reaction from his tense emotion swept over him, and he thought with amusement how angry she would be should she suddenly regain consciousness and find herself within his grasp.

But she did not come to herself, and when he laid her on the bed that Lucy had prepared, she was still as unmindful of his touch as she would have been had the spirit within her really taken flight.

Martin did not linger now. His decision was made.

"I'll step over home an' get the other horse

an' team, an' fetch the doctor back," he said quietly.

"I wish you would."

She did not thank him, accepting the favor with the simplicity of a weaker nature that leans unabashed on a stronger. Her dependence and her confession of it thrilled him with pleasure. She heard him creep cautiously down over the stairs and go out at the side door.

Then she turned her attention to making more comfortable the helpless woman upon the bed. When at length there was nothing more she could do, she sat down to wait the doctor's coming. The time dragged on. It seemed an eternity before help came.

In the meantime Ellen lay immovable as she had done from the first, her hard, sharp-cut features harder and more sharply defined in their pallor than the girl had realized them to be. In the furrowed brow, the deep-set eyes, the pitiless mouth there was not one gentle line which death could borrow to soften the stamp with which revenge and bitterness had branded her. So she would look in her coffin, Lucy thought with awe. Majesty might come into her face in the last great moment;

but it would be the majesty of hate, not of love.

What a sad, sad ending to a life!

As the girl sat thinking of the friendless, isolated existence of the woman before her, she wondered idly what her aunt would have been, if, while her nature was still plastic, she had married and sacrificed her ego in years of service for others. Ah, she would never then have come to this lonely, embittered old age! Children would have prattled at her knee, and their children would have made glad the silent house. How full of joy and opportunity such an existence would have been!

But these blessings, alas, had not been granted Ellen. Perhaps it had been her own fault. She may deliberately have thrust the gentle visitant, Love, from her dwelling, and once repulsed he may never have sought again for entrance.

Or it might be the woman was one at whose door the god had never knocked. Oh, the pity of it!

For after all did life hold any gift so rare, so supreme, as the perfect devotion of a man and woman who loved one another. It must

be a wonderful thing, that divine miracle of Love.

Dreamily Lucy's gaze wandered off to the sunny fields, and with solemn realization it came to her that should Ellen die, they and all the Webster lands would be hers, to do with as she pleased. There were so many things she had been powerless to get her aunt to do. The house needed repairs if it were to be preserved for coming generations: certain patches of soil had been worked too long and should be allowed to lie fallow; there were scores of other improvements she would like to see carried out. Now she would be free to better the property as she saw fit. She would talk with Martin Howe about it. He was brimming with all the latest farming methods. She would get him to buy her a cultivator such as he used in his own garden, and a wheel-hoe. He could advise her, too, about plowing buckwheat into the soil. And Martin would know what to do about shingling the barn and cementing the cellar.

In fact, it was amazing to discover how inseparable Martin seemed to be from her plans. He was so strong, so wise, just the type of man a woman could depend upon for sympathy and

guidance. Absently she twisted the ring on her finger.

Her mind had traveled to the events of the morning, to his battle with himself and final victory. How appealing had been his surrender! The stern personality had melted into a tenderness as winning as a child's.

If he loved a woman and she loved him —— She started guiltily to find Ellen staring at her with vague, troubled eyes.

"Where—where—am—I—?" asked the woman in a weak, quavering voice.

"Upstairs in your own room, Aunt Ellen," replied Lucy gently.

"How'd I come here?"

"You didn't feel very well."

"Yes. I remember now. I fell, didn't I?"

"I'm afraid so."

"I was fussin' at somethin', an' it made me dizzy. 'Twas the heat, I guess. Where'd you find me?"

"In the kitchen."

"An' you managed to bring me here?"

Her niece hesitated.

"Yes," she answered firmly.

Ellen paused and with dread the girl awaited her next question. But no question came.

Either the clouded mind was in too vague a mood to grasp details, or the invalid did not care. She seemed to be thinking.

"So I fell," she repeated at last.

"Yes."

Again there was a pause, and during the stillness Lucy plainly heard the sound of approaching wagon wheels. It must be Martin with the doctor. She rose softly.

"Where you goin'?" demanded her aunt.

"Just downstairs a minute. I think the doctor ——"

"You didn't send Tony for the doctor!" the invalid exclaimed, a feeble querulousness vibrating in the words.

"Yes; I didn't know what else to do."

"He can't help any."

"Perhaps he can."

"I tell you he can't," snapped Ellen. "I know well enough what's the matter with me without bein' told. I've had a shock. My feet are all cold and numb: I can't feel nothin' in 'em, nor move 'em. There ain't no remedy for that. You're only wastin' money gettin' the man here to tell me what I already know. I shan't see him."

Lucy waited a moment.

"I'm sorry I sent for him if you don't want him," she said. "But now that he is here, don't you think he'd better come up? We don't need to have him come again."

Ellen did not respond at once. Then with more animation than she had exhibited, she said:

"I s'pose we'll have to pay him whether he comes up or not, so I may's well get my money's worth out of him. Go and fetch him. He'll likely be tickled to death to see with his own eyes how bad off I am so'st he can go back an' blab the news in the village. Folks will be thankful to have something new to talk about."

Lucy could not but smile at the characteristic remark. She went out and soon returned with Doctor Marsh tiptoeing gingerly behind her.

He was a heavy, florid man whom the combination of heat and speed had transformed into a panting mechanism. Mopping the beads of perspiration from his brow, he started to seat himself at Ellen's bedside, but the woman waved him off.

"Don't come any nearer," she called, "and don't bring that bag of pills and plasters in here, either. I shan't need nothin' you've got.

I know that well's you do; an' I know better'n you do that there ain't no help for me. You needn't stay, an' you needn't come in. Good mornin'."

Having delivered herself of this ultimatum at a single breath, Ellen turned her head and closed her eyes.

The doctor looked at her in astonishment but did not move.

"Clip right along home," reiterated the sick woman without looking at the physician. "My niece'll pay you as you go out. I reckon you won't charge more'n half price, since you ain't done nothin'."

"I usually have ——"

"Mebbe. But this call ain't like your usual ones, is it?"

"No," responded the doctor with dignity, "I can't say that it is."

"Then you can't expect to get so much for it," piped Ellen triumphantly. "My niece will settle with you. Give him a dollar, Lucy —not a cent more. He'll have fun enough gossipin' about me to make up the rest of the fee."

Doctor Marsh, his face a study in outraged decorum, stalked indignantly from the room.

Ellen, peeping from beneath her lids, watched him with satisfaction.

"Has he gone?" she demanded, when Lucy returned.

"Yes."

"Thank the Lord. The fool doesn't know anything, anyway. Now you go back downstairs an' finish up your work. There ain't no call for you to be idlin' the day out, even if I am."

"I don't like to leave you alone."

"Pooh, pooh! I can't no more'n die, an' if I was to start doin' that you couldn't stop me."

Lucy moved toward the door; then turning she remarked gently:

"I'm so sorry, Aunt Ellen."

"Eh?"

"I'm sorry you're ill."

"Are you?" questioned the old woman, searching the girl's face with her small, flinty eyes. "Mebbe you are. You generally tell the truth. I guess if you do feel so, you're the only one; an' I don't quite see how even you can be."

"I am."

Her aunt fingered the sheet nervously.

"You're a good girl, Lucy," she presently

observed in a weary tone. "You won't lose nothin' by it, neither."

Embarrassed, her niece started from the room.

"Come back here a minute," muttered the woman drowsily. "I want to speak to you."

Lucy recrossed the threshold and bent over Ellen, who had sunk back on the pillows and was beckoning to her with a feeble, exhausted hand.

"You'll stay by me, won't you?" she pleaded in a whisper, for the first time displaying a consciousness of her helpless, dependent condition. "Promise you won't desert me. I'm leavin' you the place an' ten thousand dollars."

CHAPTER XIII

MELVINY ARRIVES

When Lucy descended to the kitchen she was surprised to be confronted by Jane Howe.

"Martin told us your aunt was sick, so I came over to see what I could do," said the visitor softly. "I reckon you're all up in a heap. Sickness makes a sight of trouble. I know what it is 'cause I've had it. Let me take right hold and put the kitchen to rights for you."

The words were hearty with sincerity, and the woman's intention of rendering neighborly assistance genuine, for she promptly produced a large pinafore from under her arm and proceeded to put it on.

"You're just as good as you can be," Lucy exclaimed. "But indeed I couldn't think of letting you do my work, especially on such a hot day as this."

"Why not? Didn't I just tell you I came to help? If you wasn't to let me lend a hand when you were in a tight place, I'd feel it

warn't kind of you," protested Jane, aggrieved. "Fetch the broom, an' I'll go straight to sweepin' up. My, but you have a fine big kitchen here, haven't you?"

As she rolled up her sleeves she glanced about.

"It's a monstrous house though," she went on a minute later. "You'll never be able to do all there'll be to do now, unless you have help. Let alone the work, you never can manage to lift your aunt by yourself. I reckon you'll have to send for Melviny Grey."

"And who, pray, is she?"

"Melviny? Ain't you never heard of Melviny?"

Jane regarded Lucy with astonishment.

"No."

"Oh, well, that's because you warn't born and raised here," she explained. "Why, Melviny's one of the institutions of Sefton Falls. Nothin' goes on in the way of tribulation without Melviny bein' to it."

"Oh, I see. She's a nurse."

"No, you couldn't really call her that," replied Jane thoughtfully. "An' still I don't know but you might as well tag her that way as any. 'Twould be hard to tell just what

Melviny is. She ain't only a nurse, 'cause she's a dressmaker; an' she ain't exactly a dressmaker, 'cause she makes bonnets; besides that she cleans house for folks, puts up pickles, and tends all the new babies. Melviny's just a sort of present help in time of trouble."

Lucy smiled.

"I believe, too, she ain't busy just now—not more'n ordinarily busy, I mean," Jane hastened to add quickly. "As I remember it, the Bartons' baby's just come, an' the Wheeler one ain't due yet; so I guess Melviny's yours for the askin'. An' if you can get her, you'll have a whole team."

"I don't know whether Aunt Ellen ——" began Lucy uneasily, but Jane interrupted her:

"Oh, it ain't to be expected your aunt will want her," she cut in serenely. "She won't want anybody. 'Twill drive her well-nigh crazy to think of spendin' the money. But 'tain't right for you to try to do all there is to be done alone, an' you mustn't undertake it. Just go right ahead an' get somebody in, whether your aunt likes it or not. That's the way I'd do if it was Martin. Besides, 'tain't as if Melviny was different. She fits in any-

where. She warn't ever known not to. She asks no questions an' has got no opinions. She just sorter goes along as if she was walkin' in her sleep, turnin' neither to the right nor to the left. Whatever house she's in, it's all the same to her. I believe she'd jog up to a patient with a breakfast tray if the stairs was burnin' under her. Nothin' moves her."

There was a rippling laugh from Lucy.

"We'd have to have somebody like that," she said.

"You certainly would," agreed Jane. "That's why I feel Melviny's just the one for you."

"It is so good of you to be interested."

"Bless your heart, I reckon the whole town's interested in Miss Webster bein' took down," confessed Jane naively. "But I don't deserve no credit for this plan; 'twas Martin's idea."

"Mar—your brother's?"

"Yes. Martin's awful upset 'bout your aunt bein' sick," announced Jane. "He must 'a' heard it in the village when he was there this mornin', for the minute he got back he sent me over to urge you to get somebody in. 'Course he wouldn't come himself. That would be too much to expect. But he actu-

ally said that if you decided to fetch Melviny he'd go and get her—an' from him that means a heap. I 'most fell over backwards when he suggested it, for you know how Martin feels toward your aunt."

Lucy nodded in confusion. She had an uncomfortable sense that she was not being quite frank with Jane.

"Martin would do 'bout anything for you, Miss Lucy," the woman asserted in a sudden burst of confidence. "I ——"

A cry from upstairs cut short the sentence.

"Lucy!"

"Yes, Aunt Ellen, I'll be right there."

"Go right up: I'll finish things here," whispered Jane hurriedly. "All is, if you want Martin to go for Melviny, you have only to say the word. You can wave a handkerchief out of the window, an' he'll understand."

"Where does Miss Grey ——"

"For the land sake don't call her that. Nobody'd know who you meant, an' she wouldn't, either."

"Well, Melviny, then—where does she live?"

"Down in the valley—King's Hollow, they call it."

"Why, it's miles!" protested Lucy in dismay. "I can't send your brother way down there. He's been doing nothing but errands all day."

"I know it," Jane replied. "He's been to town twice already. He came home this noon with a load of grain an' then changed horses an' went right back to the village again 'cause he forgot something. Likely you noticed him drivin' past."

The girl colored before Jane's friendly glance. She longed to tell the whole truth, for by nature she was a person of great frankness. Since, however, Martin had not seen fit to enlighten his sisters, perhaps it was wiser that she should not do so. He may have had his own reasons for keeping them in ignorance.

"Lucy!"

"Yes, I'm coming, Aunt Ellen."

"Do go along," implored Jane; "she may suspect something. I'll leave the house all picked up, tidy as a pin. You won't forget to wave to Martin if you want him."

"No. Thank you a thousand times, Ja—Miss Howe."

"Jane'll do," smiled the woman kindly. "I'm more used to it."

Catching her visitor's hand in a quick grasp, Lucy pressed it warmly and then sped up the stairs.

"Whatever have you been putterin' about so long?" queried Ellen petulantly.

"I was clearing up."

"That's good. I guess the place needed it," sighed her aunt. "I warn't half through straightenin' things in the kitchen. I thought I heard you talkin'."

"Heard me?"

"Probably 'twas a notion. My head kinder buzzes." Then she suddenly turned suspiciously on the girl, adding sharply:

"You ain't been over to the Howes'?"

"No."

"That's right. An' don't you go, neither. We don't need no help from them."

A pause followed.

"Did you want me for something?" Lucy at last inquired, after waiting for her aunt to speak.

"Yes, I did."

Nevertheless Ellen made no further remark for some time. Finally she burst out fretfully:

"I'm almighty afraid I'll have to hire in somebody, after all."

The last two words were peculiarly illuminating.

"You mean somebody to help?"

"Yes," grumbled the older woman with peevish shrillness. "We've got a pull ahead of us; I know that well enough. An' I s'pose you ain't got enough muscle to lift me. Likely you couldn't even raise me up on the pillows if you was to try. How you ever got me upstairs beats all."

Lucy hastily turned her head aside.

"They do say, though," continued Ellen, "that sometimes when folks are scat to death they can do things they can't do any other time. You were scat, I s'pose."

"Yes, I was."

"Mebbe you was scat worse when you found I warn't dead," chuckled the sick woman disagreeably.

The girl did not reply. Ellen paused; then seemed to regret her ill humor.

"Now 'bout a woman——" She halted abruptly.

"Have you any one in mind?" Lucy asked timidly.

"No," returned Ellen emphatically, "I haven't. I hate all the folks in this town about

equally—that is, all except the Howes," she concluded with significant emphasis.

"Isn't there a nurse in the village?"

"There's Melviny Grey."

"Is she a nurse?" the girl inquired innocently.

"Melviny ain't never been classified," retorted Ellen grimly. "She's neither fish, flesh nor fowl. She's taught school; laid out the dead; an' done the Lord only knows what durin' her lifetime. She can turn her hand to most anything; an' they do say she's mum as an oyster, which is a virtue out of the common in a woman."

"Suppose I see if we can get her?" suggested Lucy.

"Well," returned Ellen, with a reluctant groan, "I reckon you'll have to. You can send Tony for her when he gets back, though how he'll find her I don't know. You might's well hunt for a needle in a haystack as to track down Melviny. She's liable to be most anywheres tendin' babies or trimmin' bunnits; an' Tony's such a numskull."

"I guess we can locate her."

"Well, pack him off anyhow, the minute he gets home; an' tell him not to do any unneces-

sary travelin', an' to keep where the ground is smooth if he can. There's no use wearin' out Dolly's new shoes by trapesin' over the stones in 'em the first thing. Don't be afraid to speak up good and sharp to Tony. He's used to it an' understands it better. Ain't it the devil's own luck I should be chained down here like this!"

"Maybe you'll be better before long."

"Don't be a fool," snarled Ellen. "Of course I shan't."

She closed her eyes, and Lucy saw her face first harden into a rebellious frown, then relax into sleep. As soon as the girl was quite sure she would not be heard, she went to the window and, drawing aside the curtain, waved her handkerchief.

Evidently Martin Howe was awaiting the signal, for on receiving it he sprang up from the chopping block where he was sitting and, returning the salute, disappeared into the barn from which he presently emerged with his surrey and bay mare.

Lucy lingered to see him rattle out of the yard and pass over the crest of the hill. Then with a strange sense of comfort and companionship she went back to her aunt's room. She

sat there until dusk, watching the sleeping woman upon the bed.

Then Melvina arrived. She proved to be a large, placid-faced woman with a countenance from which every human emotion had been eliminated until it was as expressionless as a bronze Buddha. If she had ever known sorrow, delight, affection, surprise, it was so long ago that her reactionary system had forgotten how to reflect these sensations. It was obvious that nothing concerned her outside her immediate calling and that she accepted this with a stoical immovability which was neither to be diverted nor influenced.

Taking Lucy's hand in a loose, pudgy grasp she remarked:

"A shock?"

"Yes, you see, my aunt——"

"How old is she?"

"A little over seventy-five. I was away and when I——"

"First shock?"

"Yes."

"Where is she?"

"Upstairs. But before you see her I want to explain that she is a little—well, peculiar. You may find that she——"

"I shan't pay no attention," replied Melvina indifferently. "I've seen all sorts—fretters, groaners, whiners, scolders; they're all one to me. So you needn't give yourself any uneasiness."

She spoke in a voice as humdrum and colorless as was her round, flabby face, and Lucy smiled in spite of herself.

"I fancy it isn't really necessary for me to tell you anything then," she answered good-humoredly. "Of course you have had a wonderful chance to study personalities."

"I never had a chance to study anything," responded Melvina in a matter-of-fact manner. "All I know I've picked up as I went along."

"By study I mean that you have had a wide opportunity to observe human nature," explained Lucy.

"If by human nature you mean folks, I have," Melvina said in her habitual monotone.

After answering the remark, however, she made no further attempt at conversation but lapsed into a patient silence, regarding Lucy with her big, faded blue eyes. As she stood there, one gained an impression that she could have stood thus for an indefinite length of time,

—forever, if necessary. Not once did her gaze wander to her surroundings, and when Lucy conducted her to the room that had been assigned her she entered it without curiosity.

"I hope you will be comfortable here," the girl murmured with a hostess's solicitude.

"I shall be."

"And if there is anything you want ——"

"I'll ask for it."

Although there was no rebuke in the utterance, before this monument of composure, Lucy, like David Copperfield in the presence of the waiter, suddenly felt very young.

"Thank you; I wish you would," she managed to stammer, hastily closing the door.

She reflected with amusement, as she made her retreat, that there were several things she had intended to caution the new nurse not to mention, one being that it was Martin Howe who had brought her hither. But after having once seen Melvina Grey, such warnings became superfluous and absurd. There was no more probability of Melvina's imparting to Ellen the circumstances of her coming than there was of the rocks on the mountain side breaking into speech and voicing their past history. Therefore she crept downstairs to the

kitchen to prepare supper, pondering as she went as to how Ellen and this strangely stolid attendant would get on together.

"It will be like a storm dashing against granite cliffs," she thought whimsically. "Well, there is one merciful thing about it—I shall not have to worry about Melviny gossiping or telling tales."

In this assumption Lucy was quite right. Melvina Grey proved not only to be as dumb as an oyster but even more uncommunicative than that traditionally self-contained bivalve. Notwithstanding her cheery conversation about the weather, the crops, Sefton Falls, the scenery, she never trespassed upon personalities, or offered an observation concerning her immediate environment; nor could she be beguiled into narrating what old Herman Cole died of, or whether he liked his son's wife or not. This was aggravating, for Melvina had been two years a nurse in the Cole family and was well qualified to clear up these vexed questions. Equally futile, too, were Ellen's attempts to wring from her lips any confidential information about the Hoyles' financial tangles, despite the fact that she had been in the house during the tragedy of Samuel Hoyle's

failure and had welcomed the Hoyle baby into the world.

"Why, the woman's a clam—that's what she is!" announced the exasperated patient. "You can get nothin' out of her. She might as well not know anything if she's going to be that close-mouthed. I don't believe hot irons would drag the words out of her. Anyhow, she won't go retailin' our affairs all over town after she goes from here; that's one comfort!"

Lucy endorsed the observation with enthusiasm. It was indeed just as well that Melvina did not report in the sick room all that went on downstairs.

What, for example, would have been Ellen's feeling had she known that every morning some one of the Howe sisters came stealing across the fields to help with the Webster housework? And what would she have said on discovering that it was her hereditary enemy Martin himself who not only directed the cultivation of her garden but assumed much of its actual work.

Ah, Ellen would have writhed in her bed had such tidings been borne to her. She would, in truth, probably have done far more than writhe had she been cognizant that every evening this

same Mr. Martin Howe, arrayed with scrupulous care, leaped the historic wall and came to sit on the Webster doorstep and discuss problems relative to plowing and planting. And if, as frequently happened, the talk wandered off from cabbages and turnips to sunsets and moon glades, and if sometimes there were conscious intervals when there was no talk at all, who was the wiser? Certainly not Ellen, who in her dim chamber little suspected that the pair who whispered beneath her window had long since become as oblivious to the fact that they were Howe and Webster as were Romeo and Juliet that they were Montague and Capulet.

No, the weeks passed, and Ellen lay in blissful ignorance that the shuttle of Fate, ever speeding to and fro, was subtly entangling in its delicate meshes these heirs of an inherited hatred.

Martin's sisters saw the romance and rejoiced; and although she gave no sign, Melvina Grey must also have seen it.

As for the man and his beloved, they dwelt apart in an ephemeral world where only the prosaic hours when they were separated were unreal. Their realities were smiles, sighs,

glances,—the thousand and one nothings that make up the joys and agonies of a lover's existence. Thus the weeks passed.

In the meanwhile, as a result of rest and good care, Ellen steadily became stronger and soon reached a point where it was no empty platitude to assure her that she was really better.

"I do believe we shall have you downstairs yet, Aunt Ellen," said Lucy gaily. "You are gaining every minute."

"It's time I gained," Ellen retorted with acidity.

"You're gainin' all right," echoed Melvina. "I plan to have you settin' up soon. Sometime, when you're havin' a good day an' feel real spry, I mean to hist you into a chair an' let you take a look at the view."

The date for this innovation came sooner than either Lucy or the optimistic nurse foresaw, for Ellen continued to mend so rapidly that one afternoon, when twilight was deepening into purple, Melvina proposed to attempt the experiment of moving the invalid.

"How'd you like to try settin' up a spell to-night?" she inquired without preamble. "I'll get a chair ready, and fix you in it, an'

shove you over to the window so'st you can look out. There ain't much to see, to be sure; still the change will rest you, an' mebbe you'll sleep better after it."

Ellen did not demur. Melvina had proved herself a trustworthy pilot and demonstrated that her suggestions were worth considering.

"All right," she replied. "Only hadn't you better call Lucy?"

"What for?"

"To help you."

A contemptuous smile curled Melvina's lips.

"Bless your soul an' body, I've no need of help," was her answer. "You don't weigh nothin', an' even if you did, I've moved so many folks that I wouldn't hesitate. You ain't afraid, are you?"

"Mercy, no."

"There's no cause for you to be," went on the nurse reassuringly. "I know what I'm about. All you've got to do is to mind what I tell you."

Ellen's jaw squared itself.

"I 'spect that's about all I'll ever do again," she returned in a biting tone.

The proposed adventure subsequently re-

solved itself into a much simpler undertaking than it had promised, for Ellen was light as a feather and Melvina strong, deft, and experienced. Hence without mishap the invalid was transferred to the big chair and rolled to the window, where she could look out on the valley melting into the shadows of evening.

Had she restricted her observations to the scenery she might have returned to her couch refreshed both in mind and body; but unluckily she chanced to let her glance wander to the garden, and there an astonishing sight met her eyes.

In the seclusion of the lilac hedge stood two figures, that of a man and a woman. The man held in his hand a trowel and was transplanting in the rich brown soil some tender green things which the woman was handing him from a basket. The presence of a stranger who was apparently so much at home within her boundaries was in itself sufficient to arouse Ellen's curiosity; but what whetted curiosity to indignation was the manner in which the pair were performing the simple task. Even a person blind to romance and deaf to sentiment could not help realizing that the planting was a very immaterial part of the pastoral tableau, and

there was much more significance in the drama than the setting out of young seedlings.

Fascinated, Ellen gazed, her wrath rising.

"Melviny!" she burst out at last, "come here!"

"Yes, Miss Webster."

"Who's that out in the garden?"

"Where?"

"Over there near the lilac hedge," specified Ellen impatiently.

Melvina rubbed her glasses then smothered a little gasp; but she quickly recovered her wonted stolidity.

"It's Miss Lucy, I reckon," she said slowly.

"But the man—the man!" persisted Ellen. "Who is he?"

"Oh, the man. That's Mr. Howe—the one that lives next door."

"Martin Howe?"

"Yes, I believe they do call him Martin," responded Melvina imperturbably, resuming her interrupted task of turning the mattress and plumping its feathers into luxurious billows of softness.

Ellen did not speak immediately. When she did it was to ask:

"What's Martin Howe doin' on my land?"

"Helpin', I s'pose," Melvina replied with indifference. "He often does."

"He comes over here an' works?"

"Yes, marm."

Ellen brought her fist down on the arm of the chair with an exclamation of anger. Her lips were white, and she trembled. Raising her unsteady finger, she pointed toward the unconscious culprits.

"You go straight out there, Melvina," she cried, "an' tell Lucy I want her."

"Yes, marm."

"Hurry!"

"Yes."

She watched while Melvina plodded across the grass and delivered her message. Instantly Lucy dropped the basket and hastened toward the house. Another moment the girl stood before her.

"You're worse, Aunt Ellen?" she said, panting for breath.

But Ellen ignored the question.

"What's Martin Howe doin' in my garden?" she demanded fiercely.

Lucy paled.

"He came over to help me transplant the larkspur."

"By what right does he come over here, I'd like to know?"

No reply came.

"Has he been over before?" interrogated Ellen ruthlessly.

"Yes."

"When?"

"Oh, off an' on. He's been trying to help out since you've been ill."

"Help out!" repeated Ellen scornfully. "The coward! He wouldn't have dared set foot on the place if I'd been well."

"He isn't a coward!"

Lucy had drawn herself to her full height and now confronted her aunt with blazing eyes. Ellen, however, was not to be deterred.

"He *is* a coward!" she reiterated. "A coward an' a blackguard! A curse on the Howes—the whole lot of 'em!"

"Stop!"

The intonation of the single word brought Ellen's harangue to an abrupt cessation.

"You shan't speak so of Martin Howe or of his family," cried the girl. "He is no coward. If he had been as small-minded and cruel as you, he would have left you to die on the

floor the day you fell, instead of bringing you upstairs and going for a doctor—you, who have cursed him! You had better know the truth. Did you think it was I who placed you on this bed? I couldn't have done it. I am not strong enough. It was Martin—Martin Howe!"

Ellen stared stupidly.

"I'd rather have died!" she muttered between clinched teeth.

"Yes, you would," retorted Lucy. "You would rather have gone down to your grave with bitterness in your soul and a curse upon your lips than to have accepted aid from Martin Howe. You would not have helped him had he been in trouble. You would have been glad to see him suffer—glad!"

The woman listened as if spellbound.

"But Martin Howe is too much of a Christian for that. Yes, you can sneer. He is a Christian and a gentleman. You are not worthy to touch the ground beneath his feet. He would not leave you without help. Since you have been ill, he has given part of each day to working in your garden; and he is busy and tired, too. He's done it that your crops might not fail. It is Martin Howe that you have to

thank for your harvest, whether you like it or not—Martin Howe!"

Breathlessly she paused.

"You seem to have a terrible high opinion of Martin Howe," scoffed Ellen, with scathing sarcasm.

"I have."

"Likely you're in love with him," jibed the tormentor.

"Yes, I love him."

The simple confession came proudly from the girl's lips.

"An' he loves you, no doubt," continued the old woman with a laugh. "At least he's probably told you so."

"No, he hasn't."

"Oh-ho! He hasn't, eh?"

"No."

"An' never will," shouted the harpy triumphantly. "He ain't marryin' no Websters—don't you think it for one minute. He's just makin' a fool of you. That's his idea of revenge—your Christian gentleman!"

She rubbed her dank hands together.

"I don't believe it."

"You wouldn't be likely to," returned Ellen sharply. "I didn't expect it. No girl is ever

willin' to believe her lover's a scoundrel. But mark my words—Martin Howe is playin' with you—playin'—just the way a cat plays with a mouse. He's aimin' to get you into his clutches an' ruin you—wait an' see if he ain't. Oh, he's a deep one, this gentleman you seem to think so much of!"

"I'll not believe it," repeated Lucy hotly.

"You'd marry him, I s'pose," Ellen hissed.

"If he asked me, yes."

"You traitor! An' you a Webster!"

"I don't care."

The woman surveyed her niece in silence.

"Well," she said finally, "you can put your soul at rest. Martin Howe will never marry you—never! He would no more marry anybody of the Webster blood than he'd hang himself. Go on lovin' him if you want to. No good will come of it."

With this parting prophecy Ellen shut her lips, and Lucy, throbbing from the stripes of the encounter and seeing further parley fruitless, slipped from the room and fled to the quiet of the still night's solitude.

After she had gone and Ellen was once more in bed, Melvina tried in vain to quiet the increasing restlessness of her patient, but all at-

tempts to soothe the invalid were without avail. Tossing from side to side on the pillows, her fingers picking nervously at the coverings, Ellen stared into the darkness, breaking from time to time into fragments of angry dialogue.

The benediction of the evening's peace, musical with the rustling of leaves and laden with the perfume of blossoming vines, brought no solace to her heart. Presently, unable to endure the silence longer, she started up.

"Melviny," she called to the woman sitting beside her.

The nurse rose from the deepening gloom and stood erect in the moonlight, her figure throwing upon the whitewashed wall a distorted, specterlike silhouette.

"Yes, marm."

"Is Lucy still outdoors?"

"Yes."

Ellen waited an instant; then she said:

"There's somethin' in her room I want you should get for me."

"All right, Miss Webster."

"It's a long white envelope. You'll find it somewheres. It'll likely be in her desk or the table drawer. It's sealed with red wax. You'll know it when you come across it."

Although Melvina nodded, she did not move.

"You needn't be afraid to fetch it," explained Ellen querulously. "It's mine. I gave it to Lucy to keep for me."

"I see."

Melvina started promptly on her quest.

"Don't be all night about it," was Ellen's parting admonition.

While the messenger was gone, the invalid gave vent to her impatience by drumming rhythmically on the wooden edge of the bedstead, and this measured tattoo increased in speed until it beat time with the feverish bounding of her pulse and the throbbing of her heart.

"Ain't you found it yet?" she shouted at last.

"Yes, I've just come on it. It was under ——"

"No matter where it was. Bring it here."

"I'm comin'."

Bearing the envelope, Melvina appeared in the doorway.

"Let me see it," said Ellen.

She took it in her hand and, while Melvina held the candle, examined the package critically.

"Humph!" she muttered. "It's good as new."

For some unaccountable reason she seemed disappointed at the discovery.

"Now run downstairs and put it in the stove," she commanded excitedly. "Wait till every smitch of it's burned up an' then come back."

"Yes, marm."

But again Melvina loitered.

"I tell you the thing is mine to do with as I please," declared Ellen angrily.

"Yes, marm."

"Ain't you going?"

"Y-e-s."

As she heard the nurse's reluctant step on the stairs, an evil light came into the old woman's face.

"I'll fix that!" she whispered aloud.

It took Melvina some time to fulfill her errand, but at length she returned, and the moment she was inside the door Ellen's shrill query greeted her:

"Well, did you burn it?"

"Yes, marm."

"Every scrap of it?"

"Yes."

"You didn't leave nothin'?"

"No."

The woman in the bed drew a satisfied breath.

"That's all right then. Now get me a drink of water, an' I'll go to sleep."

The sleep she craved, however, did not come, for throughout the night she continued to move unceasingly.

"Your aunt didn't so much as close her eyes," announced Melvina to Lucy the next morning, while the two sat at breakfast. Nevertheless, although she advanced this information, with characteristic secretiveness she said nothing of the happenings of the previous evening.

Truly if "Whoso keepeth his mouth and his tongue keepeth his soul from troubles," Melvina's eternal serenity of spirit was assured.

CHAPTER XIV

A PIECE OF DIPLOMACY

When Lucy, radiant in her own happiness, entered her aunt's room, she was surprised to find that all Ellen's recent anger had apparently vanished, and that she had dropped into a lethargic mood from which it was difficult to rouse her. It was not so much that the elder woman was out of temper—that was to be expected—as that she seemed to be turning over in her mind some problem which was either unsolved or unpleasant, and which knitted her brow into a web of wrinkles, forcing her lips together with an ominous curl.

Lucy, who stood at the table arranging a vase of freshly gathered pansies, furtively studied the invalid's sullen reverie.

"How are you feeling to-day, Aunt Ellen?" she at last inquired with courageous effort.

"No different."

"Melvina said she was afraid you did not have a comfortable night."

The blue eyes flashed a suspicious glance of inquiry over the questioner's countenance, then closed wearily.

"I didn't," was all she said.

"I am sorry to hear that."

The regret was uttered with gentle sincerity. In an existence cloudless as her own, magnanimousness required little effort. Moreover, Lucy was forgiving by nature; and had she not been, the helplessness and friendlessness of the lonely soul before her would have presented a powerful plea for pity.

Ellen did not respond to the words.

"What was the trouble?" went on Lucy, after waiting a suitable length of time and sensing that no answer was to be forthcoming. "Were you in pain?"

At the interrogation a flame of hatred leaped into the woman's face, flickered there, and then died down, leaving it cold and hard as marble.

"I got to thinkin'," she returned briefly.

"I hope what I said did not worry you, Aunt Ellen."

"It did last night; but it don't now," responded Ellen, with a disagreeable laugh.

"That's good. I should be sorry to have been the cause of your lying here fretting."

"I ain't doin' no frettin' now," repeated Ellen. Then, changing a subject both seemed to regard as a delicate one, she asked in a more natural tone: "What were you plannin' to do this mornin'?"

"Oh, just the regular things," Lucy said cordially, glad to be once more on safer ground. "Why?"

"'Cause I'm possessed of a hankerin' for some raspberries," said Ellen. "I like 'em, an' I ain't had any for a long time. Somehow it seems as if they'd taste awful good."

Lucy's face lighted.

"Why, I'd be glad to try and get some for you, Aunt Ellen," she cried. "You know I'd love to get anything you wanted if I could. I'm so pleased that you mentioned it."

Ellen twisted her head on the pillow and began outlining the figures on the counterpane with her long, misshapen finger.

"I s'pose you couldn't find enough for a shortcake, could you?" she ventured skeptically.

"I don't know but I could. At least, I could try. Of course it's late in the season for them."

The lean finger continued to follow the flowered design of the bedcovering.

"There used to be some late ones up at the top of Pine Ridge," remarked the invalid casually. "That would be quite a walk though, an' likely further than you'd care to go."

"No, indeed it wouldn't!"

There was fervor in the protest. Already visions of a morning in the blue and gold world were shaping themselves in the girl's mind. No doubt Jane Howe would go with her; probably Martin would be too busy to leave his work; but if he were not, what a bit of Paradise they could have together!

Ellen, who read her niece's thoughts almost as readily as if they had been openly expressed, smiled a malevolent smile.

"It's a good four miles to the Ridge," she remarked. "Goin', comin', an' pickin' would take you the whole mornin', I reckon."

"I'm afraid it would," agreed Lucy. "Could you spare me as long as that?"

"Yes. I don't need nothin'; an' if I do, Melviny can get it. I'd rather have you go than not. If you could get me enough berries for a shortcake it would be worth it."

The note of suppressed eagerness in the words caused Lucy to regard her aunt with quick, indefinable suspicion.

But Ellen met the glance unflinchingly, and with a baffled sense of being mistaken the girl hurried from the room. When she returned shortly afterward and paused in the doorway, she presented a winning picture.

She had donned a short khaki skirt and a pair of riding leggings such as she had been accustomed to wear in the West, and the broad sombrero crowning her golden hair outlined it like a halo. A simple blouse turned away to give freedom to the firm white throat completed the costume. Dimpling with anticipation, she held up her tin pail.

"I'm off, Aunt Ellen," she called. "You shall have your shortcake if there is a berry within five miles."

The woman listened to the fall of the light step on the stairs and the fragment of a song that came from the girl's lips until the last note of the music died away; then she called Melvina.

"Melviny!"

"Yes, marm."

"I want you should find Tony and tell him

to harness up. There's somethin' I need done in the village."

"All right, Miss Webster."

" Bring me a sheet of paper an' a pencil before you go."

The nurse entered with the desired articles.

" I'm sendin' to town for Lawyer Benton," announced the patient with elaborate carelessness.

Neither Melvina's voice nor her face expressed the slightest curiosity.

" There's some business I must see to right away, an' I reckon I may's well get it fixed up this mornin'."

". Yes, marm."

" Give Tony this note for Mr. Benton and tell him to fetch him back soon's he can."

Nodding acquiescence, Melvina disappeared.

During the interval between the time the wheels rattled out of the yard and rattled in again, Ellen fidgeted at a high-pitched excitement, starting nervously at every sound. Sometimes she scowled; and once she burst into a harsh, cracked peal of laughter. Her thoughts, whatever they were, seemed to amuse her vastly.

The moment the tramp of the horse's hoofs

sounded on the gravel outside, she was alert and called to Melvina, stationed at the window:

"Is that Tony?"

"Yes, marm."

"Has he got Mr. Benton with him?"

"Yes, Miss Webster. An' there's somebody else, too."

"That's good. Show Mr. Benton right up here. You needn't wait. I'll call you when I need you. Let the other man sit in the kitchen 'til we want him."

Whatever the mysterious business was, it took no great while, for before an hour had passed Melvina, waiting in the hall outside the chamber door, heard a shrill summons.

"You can come in now, Melviny," Ellen said. "There's something here I want you should put your name to; an' you can fetch that man who's downstairs, an' Tony."

"All right."

When, however, a few seconds later Melvina, accompanied by the stranger and the wondering Portugese boy, entered the patient's room, it was Mr. Benton who stepped into the foreground and who came obsequiously forward, pen in hand, to address the attendant.

"The paper which you are about to sign,

Miss Grey," he began pompously, "is ——" But Ellen cut short his peroration.

"It don't make no difference to Melviny what it is, Mr. Benton," she said impatiently. "All she's got to do is to watch me write my name, an' then put hers down where you tell her, together with Tony an' the other witness. That will end it."

"But don't you think, Miss Webster, that in justice to Miss Grey, you should inform her ——"

"No, I don't," snapped Ellen. "Melviny don't care nothin' about my affairs. I'll write my name. Then you can give her the pen an' let her sign. That's all she's got to do."

Although Mr. Benton was a man of heavy, impressive appearance, he was in reality a far less effectual person to combat opposition than he seemed, and sensing that in the present instance it was easier to yield than to argue, he allowed himself to be cowed into submission and meekly gave the pen to Melvina who with blind faith inscribed her name on the crisp white paper in a small cramped hand. Caleb Saunders, the witness Mr. Benton had brought with him, next wrote his name, forming each letter with such conscientiousness that Ellen

could hardly wait until the painstaking and elaborate ceremonial was completed.

"Now let Tony sign," she ordered imperiously. "He needn't stop to wash his hands. A little dirt won't be no hindrance, an' I'm in a hurry to get this thing out of the way so Mr. Benton can go back."

Yet notwithstanding Ellen's haste, for Tony to affix his name to the document in question proved to be little short of a life work. Six times he had to be instructed on which line to write; and when on the seventh admonition his mind but vaguely grasped what was required of him, the lawyer took his stand at his elbow and with finger planted like a guidepost on the paper indicated beyond all chance of error where the signature was to be placed. When, however, the pen was redipped and upraised for the final legal touch, again it faltered. This time the delay was caused by uncertainties of spelling, which, it must be confessed, also baffled the combined intellects of the lawyer and the two women. Paponollari was not a name commonly encountered in New England. The three wrestled with it valiantly, but when a vote was taken, and it was set down in accordance with the ruling of the majority, it was dis-

heartening to discover that, when all was said and done, the Portuguese lad was not at all sure whether Tony was his Christian name or not.

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Ellen when, after more debating, the signature was finally inscribed, "I'm clean beat out. Why, I could have deeded away the whole United States in the time it's taken this lout of a boy to scribble his name. Is it any wonder that with only a stupid idiot like this for help, my garden's always behind other folks', an' my chores never done?"

Then to the bewildered, nerve-wracked alien she thundered:

"Don't blot it, you fool!—don't blot it! Can't you keep your fingers out of the wet ink? Heavens, Melviny, do get him out of here!"

Tony was only too ready to retire. The ordeal had strained his patience and had left his brain feeling the stress of unaccustomed exercise. Therefore, allowing Melvina to drive him before her much as she would have driven a docile Jersey from a cabbage patch, he made his way downstairs, followed by the perspiring lawyer.

It was not until both of them were safely on the road to the village, and the house had assumed its customary calm that Lucy arrived, her hair tumbled by the wind and her eyes glowing like stars.

"I've got your berries, Aunt Ellen," she said, holding aloft a pail heaped with fruit. "See what beauties they are! You shall have a royal shortcake."

Ellen's appreciation for some reason was, however, scanty and confused. She averted her glance from her niece's face, and even at noontime when the girl appeared bearing a marvelously baked and yet more marvelously decorated masterpiece of culinary art, she had not regained sufficient poise to partake of the delicacy in any mood save that of furtive and guilty silence.

Lucy, ever sympathetic, ventured the fear that the invalid was over-tired, and after the meal drew the shades that her aunt might rest.

In the dim light Ellen seemed more at ease and presently fell into a deep slumber that lasted until midnight and was broken only by some phantasy of her dreams which intermittently brought from her lips a series of

muttered execrations and bitter, insinuating laughs.

Toward morning she roused herself and gave a feeble cry of pain. Instantly alert, Melvina hastened to her bedside. But by the time a candle was lighted all human aid was vain. Ellen Webster was dead.

CHAPTER XV

ELLEN'S VENGEANCE

It was useless to pretend that Ellen's death did not bring to Lucy Webster a sense of relief and freedom. It was as if some sinister, menacing power that had suppressed every spontaneous impulse of her nature had suddenly been removed and left her free at last to be herself. Until now she had not realized how tired she was,—not alone physically tired but tired of groping her way to avoid the constant friction which life with her aunt engendered.

For the first few days after the funeral she kept Melvina with her and did nothing but rest. Then returning energy brought back her normal desire for action, and she began to readjust her plans. Together the two women cleaned the house from top to bottom, rooting into trunks, chests, and cupboards, and disposing of much of the litter that Ellen had accumulated. Afterward Melvina took her

leave, and Lucy turned her mind to renovations.

She would have new paper and fresh paint, she decided; also the long-coveted chintz hangings; and to this end she would make an expedition to the village to see what could be procured there in the way of artistic materials. It might be necessary for her to go to Concord, or even to Boston for the things she wanted.

In the meantime, since she was driving to town, perhaps she had better take along her aunt's will. There must be formalities to be observed regarding it, and although she was not at all sure what they were, Mr. Benton would of course know.

But search as she would, the white envelope with its imposing red seal was nowhere to be found. She went through every drawer in her bureau, every pigeonhole in her desk; she ransacked closet and bookshelf; she even emptied all her belongings upon the bed and examined each article carefully to see if the missing document had by any chance strayed into a fantastic hiding place; but the paper failed to come to light.

What could have become of it? The envelope had been there, that she knew. Only a

week ago she had seen it in the top drawer of her desk. She would stake her oath that she had not removed it. Vague disquietude took possession of her. Tony had always been honest, and of Melvina's integrity there could be no question. As for Ellen, had she not herself put the will into the girl's keeping—as a weapon with which to meet this very emergency? It was incredible, preposterous to assume that she had taken it back, especially when one considered her helplessness to do so unaided. That solution might as well be dismissed as ridiculous.

The paper was lost, that was all there was to it. Lost!

In her own absent-mindedness, or in a moment of confusion and weariness, she had either accidentally destroyed it, or she had removed it from its customary place to a safer spot and forgotten where she had put it.

Yet, after all, how foolish it was of her to worry. Doubtless Mr. Benton had a copy of the document, and if she made full confession of her stupidity he would know what to do. Didn't lawyers always keep copies of every legal paper they drew up? They must of course do so.

Therefore without breathing a word of her troubles to the Howes—not even to Martin—she set forth to the village, her dreams of redecorating the house being thrust, for the time being, entirely into the background by this disquieting happening.

Mr. Benton was alone in his stuffy little office when she arrived. Evidently his professional duties were not pressing, for he was hunched up over a small air-tight stove and amid a smudge of tobacco smoke was reading "Pickwick Papers." At the entrance of a client, however, and this client in particular, he rose in haste, and slipping simultaneously into his alpaca coat and his legal manner—the two seemed to be a one-piece garment—held out his hand with a mixture of solicitude and pleasure.

"My dear Miss Webster," he began. "I hope you are well. You have sustained a great loss since I last beheld you, a great loss."

He drew forward a second armchair similar to the one in which he had been sitting and motioned Lucy to accept it.

"Your aunt was a worthy woman who will be profoundly missed in the community," he continued in a droning voice.

Lucy did not answer. In fact the lawyer did not seem to expect she would. He was apparently delivering himself of a series of observations which came one after the other in habitual sequence, and which he preferred should not be interrupted.

"Death, however, is the common lot of mankind and must come to us all," he went on in the same singsong tone, "and I hope that in the thought of your devotion to the deceased you will find comfort."

Having now terminated the introduction with which he was accustomed to preface his remarks on all such occasions, he regarded the girl in the chair opposite him benignly.

"I was intending to come to see you," he went on more cheerfully, and yet being careful to modulate his words so that they might still retain the bereavement vibration, "but you have forestalled me, I see. I did not wish to hurry you unduly."

"I have been tired," Lucy replied simply, "but I am rested now and quite ready to do whatever is necessary."

"I am glad to hear that, very glad," Mr. Benton returned. "Of course there is no im-

mediate haste; nevertheless it is well to straighten out such matters as soon as it can conveniently be done. When do you contemplate leaving town?"

Lucy met the question with a smile.

"Oh, I don't intend to leave Sefton Falls," she said quickly. "I have grown very fond of the place and mean to remain here."

"Indeed," nodded Mr. Benton. "That is interesting. I am glad to hear we are not to lose you from the village."

He rubbed his hands and continued to nod thoughtfully.

"About how soon, if I might ask so personal a question, do you think you could be ready to hand over the house to the new tenant?" he at last ventured with hesitation.

"I'm afraid I don't understand you."

The lawyer seemed surprised.

"You knew of your aunt's will?"

"I knew she had made a will, yes, sir. She gave it to me to keep for her."

"You were familiar with the contents of it?"

"Not entirely so," Lucy answered. "I knew she had left me the house and some money. She told me that much."

"U—u—m!" observed Mr. Benton. "But the second will—she spoke to you of that also?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"You were not cognizant that a few days before the deceased passed—shall we say, away"—he paused mournfully,—"that she made a new will and revoked the previous one?"

"No."

"No one told you that?"

"No, sir."

The lawyer straightened himself. Matters were becoming interesting.

"There was a second will," he declared with deliberation. "It was drawn up one morning in your aunt's room, with Miss Melvina Grey, Mr. Caleb Saunders, and the boy Tony as witnesses."

Lucy waited breathlessly.

"This will," went on Mr. Benton, "provides for quite a different disposition of the property. I must beg you to prepare yourself for a disappointment."

The girl threw back her head.

"Go on, please," she commanded.

"Quite a different disposition of the prop-

erty," repeated Mr. Benton, dwelling on the cadence of the phrase.

"What is it?"

The man delayed.

"Have you any reason to suppose, Miss Webster, that your aunt was—shall we say annoyed, with you?"

"I knew she did not like the way I felt about some things," admitted Lucy.

"But did not some vital difference of opinion arise between you recently?" Mr. Benton persisted.

"I spoke my mind to Aunt Ellen the other day," confessed the girl. "I had to."

"Ah! Then that explains matters!"

"What matters?"

"The somewhat strange conditions of the will."

Having untangled the enigma to his own satisfaction, Mr. Benton proceeded to sit back and enjoy its solution all by himself.

"Can't you tell me what they are?" Lucy at last inquired impatiently.

"I can enlighten you, yes. In fact, it is my duty to do so."

Rising, he went to the desk drawer and made a pretense of fumbling through his papers; but

it was easy to see that the document he sought had been carefully placed on the top of the sparse, untidy pile that cluttered the interior of the rickety piece of furniture.

"Perhaps," he remarked, "there is no real need to burden your mind with legal formalities; nevertheless ——"

"Oh, don't bother to read me the whole will," broke out Lucy sharply. "Just tell me in plain terms what Aunt Ellen has done."

It was obvious that Mr. Benton did not at all relish the off-handedness of the request.

He depended not a little on his professional pomposity to bolster up a certain lack of confidence in himself, and stripped of this legal regalia he shriveled to a very ordinary person indeed.

"Your aunt," he began in quite a different tone, "has left her property to Mr. Martin Howe."

Lucy recoiled.

"To whom?"

"To Martin Howe."

There was an oppressive pause.

"To Martin Howe?" the girl stammered at length. "But there must be some mistake."

Mr. Benton met her gaze kindly.

"I fear there is no mistake, my dear young lady," he said.

"Oh, I don't mean because my aunt has cut me off," Lucy explained with pride. "She of course had a right to do what she pleased. But to leave the property to Martin Howe! Why, she would scarcely speak to him."

"So I have gathered," the lawyer said. "That is what makes the will so remarkable."

"It is preposterous! Martin will never accept it in the world."

"That contingency is also provided for," put in Mr. Benton.

"How?"

"The property is willed to the legatee—house, land, and money—to be personally occupied by said beneficiary and not sold, deeded, or given away on the conditions—a very unusual condition this second one ——" Again Mr. Benton stopped, his thumbs and finger neatly pyramided into a miniature squirrel cage, over the top of which he regarded his client meditatively. His reverie appeared to be intensely interesting.

"Very unusual indeed," he presently concluded absently.

"Well?" demanded Lucy.

"Ah, yes, Miss Webster," he continued, starting at the interrogation. "As I was saying, the conditions made by the deceased are unusual—peculiar, in fact, if I may be permitted to say so. The property goes to Mr. Martin Howe on the condition that in six months' time he personally rebuilds the wall lying between the Howe and Webster estates and now in a state of dilapidation."

"He will never do it," burst out Lucy indignantly, springing to her feet.

"In that case the property goes unreservedly to the town of Sefton Falls," went on Mr. Benton in an even tone, "to be used as a home for the destitute of the county."

The girl clinched her hands. It was a trap,—a last, revengeful, defiant act of hatred.

The pity that any one should go down into the grave with such bitterness of heart was the girl's first thought.

Then the cleverness of the old woman's plot began to seep into her mind. All unwittingly Martin Howe was made a party in a diabolical scheme to defraud her—the woman who loved him—of her birthright, of the home that should have been hers.

The only way he could restore to her what

was her own was to marry her, and to do that he must perform the one deed he had pledged himself never to be tempted into: he must rebuild the wall. Otherwise the property would pass into other hands.

Nothing could so injure the Howe estate as to have a poor farm next door. Ellen of course knew that. Ah, it was a vicious document—that last Will and Testament of Ellen Webster.

Mr. Benton's voice broke in upon Lucy's musings.

"The deceased," he added with a final grin of appreciation, "appoints Mr. Elias Barnes as executor, *he being,*" the lawyer quoted from the written page, "*the meanest man I know.*"

Thus did the voice of the dead speak from the confines of the grave! Death had neither transformed nor weakened the intrepid hater. From her aunt's coffin Lucy could seem to hear vindictive chuckles of revenge and hatred, and a mist gathered before her eyes.

She had had no regrets for the loss of Ellen's body; but she could not but lament with genuine grief the loss of her soul.

CHAPTER XVI

LUCY COMES TO A DECISION

Slowly Lucy drove homeward, her dreams of rosy wall papers and gay chintz hangings shattered. Thrusting into insignificance these minor considerations, however, was the thought of Martin Howe and what he would say to the revelation of Ellen's cupidity.

She would not tell him about the will, on that she was determined. She would not mention it to anybody. Instead she would go promptly to work packing up her few possessions and putting the house in perfect order. Fortunately it had so recently been cleaned that to prepare it for closing would be a simple matter.

As for herself and Martin, the dupes of an old woman's vengeance, both of them were of course blameless. Nevertheless, the present twist of Fate had entirely changed their relation to one another.

When she had defied her aunt and voiced

with such pride her love for the man of her heart, it had been in a joyous faith that although he had not made similar confession, he would ultimately do so. The possibility that he was making of her affection a tool for vengeance had never come into her mind until Ellen had put it there, and then with involuntary loyalty she had instantly dismissed the suggestion as absurd. But here was a different situation. She was no longer independent of circumstances. She was penniless in the world, all the things that should have been hers having been swept away by the malicious stroke of a pen. It was almost as tragic to be married out of spite as out of pity.

She knew Martin's standards of honor. He would recognize, as she did, the justice of the Webster homestead and lands remaining in her possession; and since the will stipulated that he must personally occupy these properties and could neither sell, transfer, nor give them to their rightful owner, she felt sure he would seize upon the only other means of making her freehold legally hers. Whether he loved her or not would not now be in his eyes the paramount issue. In wedding her he would feel he was carrying out an act of justice which un-

der the guise of affection it would be quite legitimate to perform.

This solution of the difficulty, however, cleared away but the minor half of the dilemma. Had she been willing to accept Martin's sacrifice of himself and marry him, there still remained the wall,—the obstacle that for generations had loomed between the peace of Howe and Webster and now loomed 'twixt her and her lover with a magnitude it had never assumed before.

Martin would never rebuild that wall—never!

Had he not vowed that he would be burned at the stake first? That he would face persecution, nakedness, famine, the sword before he would do it? All the iron of generations of Howe blood rung in the oath. He had proclaimed the decree throughout the county. Everybody for miles around knew how he felt. Though he loved her as man had never loved woman (a miracle which she had no ground for supposing) he would never consent to such a compromise of principles. The being did not exist for whom Martin Howe would abandon his creed of honor.

She knew well that strata of hardness in his

nature, the adamantine will that wrought torture to its possessor because it could not bend. Even the concessions he had thus far made, had, she recognized, cost him a vital struggle. On the day of her aunt's seizure had she not witnessed the warfare between pity and hatred, generosity and revenge? The powers of light had triumphed, it is true; but it had been only after the bitterest travail; and ever since she had been conscious that within his soul Martin had viewed his victory with a smoldering, unformulated contempt. Even his attentions to her had been paid with a blindfolded, lethargic unwillingness, as if he offered them against the dictates of his conscience and closed his eyes to a crisis he would not, dared not face.

It was one thing for her to light-heartedly announce that she loved Martin Howe and would marry him; but it was quite another matter for him to reach a corresponding conclusion. To her vengeance was an antiquated creed, a remnant of a past decade, which it cost her no effort to brush aside. Martin, on the contrary, was built of sterner stuff. He hated with the vigor of the red-blooded hater, fostering with sincerity the old-fashioned dogmas of justice and retribution. "An eye

for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" was a matter of right; and the mercy that would temper it was not always a virtue. More often it was a weakness.

To be caught in Ellen Webster's toils and own himself beaten would, Lucy well understood, be to his mind a humiliating fate.

Only a compelling, unreasoning love that swept over him like some mighty tidal wave, wrenching from its foundations every impeding barrier, could move him to surrender; and who was she to arouse such passion in any lover? She was only a woman human and faulty. She had indeed a heart to bestow, and without vain boasting it was a heart worth the winning; she held herself in sufficient esteem to set a price on the treasure. But was it jewel enough to prompt a man to uproot every tradition of his moral world for its possession?

Sadly she shook her head. No, Martin would never be lost in a mood of such overmastering love as this for her. If he made a proposal of marriage, it would be because he was spurred by impulses of justice and pity; and no matter how worthy these motives, he would degenerate into the laughing stock of the community the instant he began to carry

out the terms of the will and reconstruct the wall. She could hear now the taunts and jests of the townsfolk. Some of them would speak in good-humored banter, some with premeditated malice; but their jibes would sting.

"So you're tacklin' that wall in spite of all you said, are you, Martin?"

"Ellen Webster's got you where she wanted you at last, ain't she, Martin?"

"This would be a proud day for the Websters, Martin!"

There would even be those who would meanly assert that a man could be made to do anything for money.

Ah, she knew what the villagers would say, and so, too, would Martin. How his proud spirit would writhe and smart under the lash of their tongues! Neither pity nor love for her should ever place him in a position of such humiliation.

Before he was confronted by the choice of turning her out of doors, or marrying her and making himself the butt of the county wits, she must clear his path from embarrassment and be gone. She had a pittance of her own that would support her until she could find employment that would render her independent of

charity. Her future would unquestionably be lonely, since she must leave behind her not only the man she loved but the home about which her fondest dreams centered. Nevertheless, she had never lacked courage to do what must be done; and in the present emergency the pride of the Websters came surging to reenforce her in her purpose.

Nobody must know she was going away—nobody. There must be no leave-takings and no tears. The regrets she had at parting with all she held dear she would keep to herself, nor should any of her kindly acquaintances have the opportunity to offer to her a sheltering roof as they had to old Libby Davis, the town pauper.

Laughing hysterically, she dashed aside the tears that gathered in her eyes. Would it not be ironic if the Webster mansion became a poor farm and she its first inmate?

As for Martin—a quick sob choked her. Well, he should be left free to follow whatever course he ordained. Perhaps he would scornfully turn Ellen's bequest back to the town; perhaps, on the other hand, he would conquer his scruples, rebuild the wall, and become rich and prosperous as a result. With an aug-

mented bank account and plenty of fertile land, what might he not accomplish? Why, it would make him one of the largest land-owners in the State!

A glow of pleasure thrilled her. She hoped he would accept the legacy; she prayed he would.

Then, even though she were lonely and penniless, she would have the satisfaction of knowing that what she had forfeited had been for his betterment. There would be some joy in that. To give over her ancestral homestead for a pauper institution that was neither needed nor necessary, and was only a spiteful device of Ellen's to outwit her was an empty charity.

Having thus formulated her future action, Lucy hastened to carry out her plans with all speed. Before Mr. Benton imparted to Martin the terms of the will, before any hint of them reached his ears, she must be far from Sefton Falls; otherwise he might anticipate her determination and thwart her in it.

How fortunate it was that there was so little to impede her flight! All she owned in the world she could quickly pack into the small trunk she had brought with her from the West.

Not to one article in the house had she any claim; Mr. Benton had impressed that upon her mind. Even the family silver, the little dented mug from which her father had drunk his milk had been willed away.

However, what did it matter now? Sentiment was a foolish thing. There would never be any more Websters to inherit these heirlooms. She was the last of the line; and she would never marry.

Having reached this climax in her meditations, she turned into the driveway and, halting before the barn door, called to Tony to come and take the horse. Afterward she disappeared into the house.

All the afternoon she worked feverishly, putting everything into irreproachable order. Then she packed her few belongings into the little brown trunk. It was four o'clock when she summoned the Portuguese boy from the field.

"I want you to take me and my trunk to the station, Tony," she said, struggling to make the order a casual one. "Then you are to come back here and go on with your work as usual until Mr. Howe or some one else asks you to do otherwise. I will pay you a month in

advance, and by that time you will be told what you are to do."

Tony eyed her uncomprehendingly.

"You ain't leavin' for good, Miss Lucy?" he inquired at last.

"Yes."

"B—u—t—t—how can you? Ain't this your home?"

"Not now, Tony."

The bewildered foreigner scratched his head.

The girl had been kind to him, and he was devoted to her.

"I don't see ——" he began.

"By and by you will understand," said Lucy gently. "It is all right. I want to go away."

"To go away from here?" gasped the lad.

Lucy nodded.

"Is it that you're lonely since Miss Ellen died?"

"I guess so."

Tony was thoughtful; then with sudden inspiration he ventured the remark:

"Mebbe you're afraid to stay alone by yourself in the house nights."

"Maybe."

"You ain't seen a ghost?" he whispered.

"I'm going away because of a ghost, yes," Lucy murmured half to herself.

"Then I don't blame you," exclaimed Tony vehemently. "You wouldn't ketch me stayin' in a house that was haunted by spirits. Where you goin'—back out West?"

"Perhaps so."

She helped him to carry the trunk out to the wagon and strap it in; then she got in herself.

As they drove in silence out of the yard, not a soul was in sight; nor was there any delay at the station to give rise to gossip. She had calculated with such nicety that the engine was puffing round the bend in the track when she alighted on the platform.

Hurriedly she bought her ticket, checked her trunk, and put her foot on the step as the train started.

Waving a good-by to the faithful servant, who still lingered, she passed into the car and sank down into a seat. She watched the valley, beautiful in amethyst lights, flit past the window; then Sefton Falls, flanked by misty hills, came into sight and disappeared. At last all the familiar country of the moving panorama was blotted out by the darkness, and she was alone.

Her eyes dropped to the ticket in her lap. Why she had chosen that destination she could not have told. It would, however, serve as well as another. If in future she was to be forever cut off from all she loved on earth, what did it matter where she went?

CHAPTER XVII

THE GREAT ALTERNATIVE

After Lucy left the office, Mr. Benton sat for an interval thinking. Then he yawned, stretched his arms, went to his desk drawer, and took out the will which he slipped into his waistcoat pocket.

With hands behind him he took a turn or two across the room.

He was a man not lacking in feeling, and impulses of sympathy and mercy until now had deterred him from the execution of his legal duties. Since, however, it was Lucy Webster who had rung up the curtain on the drama in which an important part had been assigned him, there was no need for him to postpone longer the playing of his rôle. He had received his cue.

His lines, he admitted, were not wholly to his liking—not, in fact, to his liking at all; he considered them cruel, unfair, vindictive. Notwithstanding this, however, the plot was

a novel one, and he was too human not to relish the fascinating uncertainties it presented. In all his professional career no case so remarkable had fallen to his lot before.

When as a young man he had attacked his calling, he had been thrilled with enthusiasm and hope. The law had seemed to him the noblest of professions. But the limitations of a small town had quickly dampened his ardor, and instead of righting the injustices of the world as he had once dreamed of doing, he had narrowed into a legal machine whose mechanism was never accelerated by anything more stirring than a round of petty will-makings, land-sellings, bill collections and mortgage foreclosures.

But at last here was something out of the ordinary, a refreshing and unique human comedy that would not only electrify the public but whose chief actors balked all speculation. He could not help owning that Ellen Webster's bequest, heartily as he disapproved of it, lent a welcome bit of color to the grayness of his days. Ever since he had drawn up the fantastic document it had furnished him with riddles so interesting and unsolvable that they rendered tales of Peter Featherstone and Mar-

tin Chuzzlewit tame reading. These worthies were only creations of paper and ink; but here was a living, breathing enigma,—the enigma of Martin Howe!

What would this hero of the present situation do? For undoubtedly it was Martin who was to be the chief actor of the coming drama.

The lawyer knocked the ashes from his pipe, thrust it into his pocket and, putting on his hat and coat, stepped into the hall, where he lingered only long enough to post on his office door the hastily scrawled announcement: "Will return to-morrow." Then he hurried across the town green to the shed behind the church where he always hitched his horse. Backing the wagon out with care, he jumped into it and proceeded to drive off down the high road.

Martin Howe was in the field when Mr. Benton arrived. Under ordinary conditions the man would have joined him there, but to-day such a course seemed too informal, and instead he drew up his horse at the front door and sent Jane to summon her brother.

Fortunately Martin was no great distance away and soon entered, a flicker of curiosity in his eyes.

The lawyer began with a leisurely introduction.

"I imagine, Howe, you are a trifle surprised to have a call from me," he said.

"Yes, I am a bit."

"I drove over on business," announced Mr. Benton.

Nevertheless, although he prefaced his revelation with this remark, he did not immediately enlighten his listener as to what the business was. In truth, now that the great moment for breaking silence had arrived, Mr. Benton found himself obsessed with a desire to prolong its flavor of mystery. It was like rolling the honied tang of a cordial beneath his tongue. A few words and the secret would lay bare in the light of common day, its glamor rent to atoms.

Martin waited patiently.

"On business," repeated Mr. Benton at last, as if there had been no break in the conversation.

"I'm ready to hear it," Martin said, smiling.

"I came, in fact, to acquaint you with the contents of a will."

Yet again the lawyer's tongue, sphinxlike

from habit, refused to utter the tidings it guarded.

"The will," he presently resumed, "of my client, Miss Ellen Webster."

He was rewarded by seeing a shock of surprise run through Martin's frame.

"I don't see how Miss Webster's will can be any concern of mine," Martin replied stiffly.

The attorney ignored the observation. Continuing with serenity, he observed:

"As I understand it, you and Miss Webster were not ——" he coughed hesitatingly behind his hand.

"No, we weren't," cut in Martin. "She was a meddling, aggravating old harridan. I hated her, and I'm glad she's gone."

"That is an unfortunate sentiment," remarked Mr. Benton, "unfortunate and disconcerting, because, you see, Miss Ellen Webster has left you all her property."

"*Me!* Left *me* her property!"

The dynamic shock behind the words sent the man to his feet.

Mr. Benton nodded calmly.

"Yes," he reiterated, "Miss Webster has made you her sole legatee."

Martin regarded his visitor stupidly.

"I reckon there's some mistake, sir," he contrived to stammer.

"No, there isn't—there's no mistake. The will was legally drawn up only a few days before the death of the deceased. No possible question can be raised as to her sanity, or the clearness of her wishes concerning her property. She desired everything to come to you."

"Let me see the paper!" cried Martin.

"I should prefer to read it to you."

Slowly Mr. Benton took out his spectacles, polished, and adjusted them. Then with impressive deliberation he drew forth and unfolded with a mighty rustling the last will and testament of Ellen Webster, spinster. Many a time he had mentally rehearsed this scene, and now he presented it with a dignity that amazed and awed. Every *whereas* and *aforesaid* rolled out with due majesty, its resonance echoing to the ceiling of the chilly little parlor.

As Martin listened, curiosity gave place to wonder, wonder to indignation. But when at last the concluding condition of the bequest was reached, the rebuilding of the wall, an oath burst from his lips.

"The harpy!" he shouted. "The insolent hell hag!"

"Softly, my dear sir, softly!" pleaded Mr. Benton in soothing tones.

"I'll have nothin' to do with it—nothin'!" stormed Martin. "You can bundle your paper right out of here, Benton. Rebuild that wall! Good God! Why, I wouldn't do it if I was to be flayed alive. Ellen Webster knew that well enough. She was perfectly safe when she left me her property with that tag hitched to it. She did it as a joke—a cussed joke—out of pure deviltry. 'Twas like her, too. She couldn't resist giving me one last jab, even if she had to wait till she was dead and gone to do it."

Like an infuriated beast Martin tramped the floor. Mr. Benton did not speak for a few moments; then he observed mildly:

"You understand that if you refuse to accept the property it will be turned over to the county for a poor farm."

"I don't care who it's turned over to, or what becomes of it," blustered Martin.

The attorney rubbed his hands. Ah, it was a spirited drama,—quite as spirited as he had anticipated, and as interesting too.

"It's pretty rough on the girl," he at last remarked casually.

"The girl?"

"Miss Webster."

Violently Martin came to himself. The fury of his anger had until now swept every other consideration from his mind.

"It will mean turning Miss Webster out of doors, of course," continued Mr. Benton impassively. "Still she's a thoroughbred, and I fancy nothing her aunt could do would surprise her. In fact, she as good as told me that, when she was at my office this morning."

"She knows, then?"

"Yes, I had to tell her, poor thing. I imagine, too, it hit her pretty hard, for she had been given to understand that everything was to be hers. She hasn't much in her own right; her aunt told me that."

An icy hand suddenly gripped Martin's heart. He stood immovable, as if stunned. Lucy! Lucy penniless and homeless because of him!

Little by little Ellen's evil scheme unfolded itself before his consciousness. He saw the cunning of the intrigue which the initial outburst of his wrath had obscured. There was more involved in his decision than his own inclinations. He was not free simply to flout

the legacy and toss it angrily aside. Ellen, a Richelieu to the last, had him in a trap that wrenched and wrecked every sensibility of his nature. The more he thought about the matter, the more chaotic his impulses became. Justice battled against will; pity against vengeance; love against hate; and as the warring factors strove and tore at one another, and grappled in an anguish of suffering, from out the turmoil two forces rose unconquerable and stubbornly confronted one another,—the opposing forces of Love and Pride. There they stood, neither of them willing to yield. While Love pleaded for mercy, Pride urged the destruction of every gentler emotion and clamored for revenge.

Mr. Benton was not a subtle interpreter of human nature, but in the face of the man before him he saw enough to realize the fierceness of the spiritual conflict that raged within Martin Howe's soul. It was like witnessing the writhings of a creature in torture.

He did not attempt to precipitate a decision by interfering. When, however, he had been a silent spectator of the struggle so long that he perceived Martin had forgotten his very existence, he ventured to speak.

"Maybe I'd better leave you to reconsider your resolution, Howe," he remarked.

"I—yes—it might be better."

"Perhaps after you've thought things out, you'll change your mind."

Martin did not reply. The lawyer rose and took up his hat.

"How long before you've got to know?" inquired Martin hoarsely.

"Oh, I can give you time," answered Mr. Benton easily. "A week, say—how will that do?"

"I shan't need as long as that," Martin replied, looking before him with set face. "I shall know by to-morrow what I am going to do."

"There's no such hurry as all that."

"I shall know by to-morrow," repeated the younger man in the same dull voice. "All the time in the universe won't change things after that."

Mr. Benton made no response. When in his imaginings he had pictured the scene, he had thought that after the first shock of surprise was over, he and Martin would sit down together sociably and discuss each petty detail of the remarkable comedy. But comedy had

suddenly become tragedy—a tragedy very real and grim—and all desire to discuss it had ebbed away.

As he moved toward the door, he did not even put out his hand; on the contrary, whispering a hushed good night and receiving no reply to it, he softly let himself out and disappeared through the afternoon shadows.

If Martin were conscious of his departure, he at least gave no sign of being so, but continued to stand motionless in the same spot where Mr. Benton had left him, his hands gripped tightly behind his back, and his head thrust forward in thought.

Silently the hours passed. The sun sank behind the hills, tinting the ridge of pines to copper and leaving the sky a sweep of palest blue in which a single star trembled.

Still Martin did not move. Once he broke into a smothered cry:

"I cannot! My God! I cannot!"

The words brought Jane to the door.

"Martin!" she called.

There was no answer and, turning the knob timidly, she came in.

"Oh!" she ejaculated. "How you fright-

ened me! I didn't know there was anybody here. Don't you want a light?"

"No."

"Has—has Mr. Benton gone?"

"Yes."

"That's good. Supper's ready."

"I don't want anything."

"Mercy, Martin! You ain't sick?"

"No."

"But you must be hungry."

"No. I'm not."

Still the woman lingered; then making a heroic plunge, she faltered:

"There—there ain't nothin' the matter, is there?"

So genuine was the sympathy beneath the quavering inquiry that it brought to Martin's troubled heart a gratifying sense of warmth and fellowship.

"No," he said, his impatience melting to gentleness. "Don't worry, Jane. I've just got to do a little thinking by myself, that's all."

"It ain't money you're fussin' over then," said his sister, with a sigh of relief.

"No—no, indeed. It's nothin' to do with money."

"I'm thankful for that."

Nevertheless as he mounted to his room, Martin reflected that after all it was money which was at the storm center of his difficulties. He had not thought at all of the matter from its financial aspect. Yet even if he had done so in the first place, it would have had no influence upon his decision. He didn't care a curse for the money. To carry his point, he would have tossed aside a fortune twice as large. The issue he confronted, stripped of all its distractions, was simply whether his love were potent enough to overmaster his pride and bring it to its knees.

Even for the sake of Lucy Webster, whom he now realized he loved with a passion more deep-rooted than he had dreamed, could he compel himself to do the thing he had staked his oath he would not do?

Until this moment he had never actually examined his affection for the girl. Events had shaped themselves so naturally that in cowardly fashion he had basked in the joy of the present and not troubled his mind to inquire whither the phantasies of this lotus-eater's existence were leading him. When a clamoring conscience had lifted up its voice, he had stilled it with platitudes. The impact of the crisis he

now faced had, however, jarred him out of his tranquillity and brought him to an appreciation of his position.

He loved Lucy Webster with sincere devotion. All he had in the world he would gladly cast at her feet,—his name, his heart, his worldly possessions; only one reservation did he make to the completeness of his surrender. His pride he could not bend. It was not that he did not wish to bend it. The act was impossible. Keenly as he scorned himself, he could not concede a victory to Ellen Webster,—not for any one on earth.

The jests of the townsfolk were nothing. He did not lack courage to laugh back into the faces of the jeering multitude. But to own himself beaten by a mocking ghost, a specter from another sphere; to relinquish for her gratification the traditions of his race and the trust of his fathers; to leave her triumphant on the field,—this he could not do for any woman living—or dead.

Ah, it was a clever net the old woman had spun to ensnare him, more clever than she knew, unless by some occult power she was cognizant of his affection for Lucy. Could it be? The thought arrested him.

Had Ellen guessed his secret, and, armed with the knowledge, shaped her revenge accordingly? If so, she was a thousand times more cruel than he had imagined her capable of being, and it gave quite a different slant to her perfidy. Suppose she had suspected he loved Lucy and that Lucy loved him. Then her plot was one to separate them, and the very course he was following was the result she had striven to bring about. She had meant to wreck his happiness and that of the woman he loved; she had planned, schemed, worked to do so.

Martin threw back his head and laughed defiantly up at the ceiling. Well, she should not succeed. He would marry Lucy, and he would rebuild the wall: and with every stone he put in place he would shout to the confines of the universe, to the planets where Ellen Webster's spirit lurked, to the grave that harbored her bones:

Amor Vincit Omnia!

With jubilant step he crossed to the window and looked out. A slender arc of silver hung above the trees, bathing the fields in mystic splendor. It was not late. Only the maelstrom of torture through which he had passed

had transformed the minutes to hours, and the hours to years. Why, the evening was still young, young enough for him to go to Lucy and speak into her ear all the love that surged in his heart. They had been made for one another from the beginning. He would wed her, and the old homestead she venerated should be hers indeed. It was all very simple, now.

With the abandon of a schoolboy he rushed downstairs, pausing only an instant to put his head in at the kitchen door and shout to Jane:

"I'm goin' over to the Websters'. I may be late. Don't sit up for me."

Then he was gone. Alone beneath the arching sky, his happiness mounted to the stars. How delicious was the freshness of the cool night air! How sweet the damp fragrance of the forest! The spires of the pines richly dark against the fading sky were already receding into the mists of twilight.

He went along down the road, his swinging step light as the shimmer of a moonbeam across a spangled pool.

The Webster house was in darkness. Nevertheless this discovery did not disconcert him, for frequently Lucy worked until dusk among

her flowers, or lingered on the porch in the peace of the evening stillness.

To-night, however, he failed to find her in either of her favorite haunts and, guided by the wailing music of a harmonica, he came at last upon Tony seated on an upturned barrel at the barn threshold, striving to banish his loneliness by breathing into the serenity of the twilight the refrain of "Home, Sweet Home."

"Hi, Tony!" called Martin. "Do you know where Miss Lucy is?"

"I don't, sir," replied the boy, rising. "She didn't 'xactly say where she was goin'."

"I s'pose she's round the place somewhere."

"Land, no, sir! Didn't she tell you? Why, she went away on the train this afternoon."

"On the train?" Martin repeated automatically.

"Yes, sir."

"When is she comin' back?"

"She ain't comin' back," announced the Portuguese. "She's goin' out West or somewheres to live."

A quick shiver vibrated through Martin's body, arresting the beat of his pulse. Scarcely knowing what he did, he caught the lad roughly by the shoulder.

"When did she go?" he demanded. "What time? What did she say?"

Tony raised a frightened glance to his questioner's face.

"She went this afternoon," gasped he, "about five o'clock it was. She took the Boston train. She said she guessed she'd go back out West 'cause she didn't want to stay here any more. She was afraid of ghosts."

"Ghosts!"

Tony nodded.

"I'm to leave the key of the house at Mr. Benton's in the mornin' an' tell him everythin's cleaned up an' in order. An' Miss Lucy said I was to stay here an' go on with the work till you or somebody else told me to stop."

Without comment Martin listened. Slowly the truth made its impress on his mind. Lucy had gone! Gone!

With the knowledge, all the latent affection he felt for her crystallized into a mighty tide that rushed over and engulfed him in its current. Hatred, revenge, pride were no more; only love persisted,—love the all-powerful, the all-conquering, the all-transforming.

Lucy, dearer to him than his own soul, had gone. Either in anger, or driven forth by

maiden shyness, she had fled from him; and until she was brought back and was safe within the shelter of his arms, nothing remained for him in life.

Tony saw him square his shoulders and turn away.

"Good night, Mr. Howe," he called.

"Good night, Tony."

"Any orders for to-morrow?"

"No. Go on with your work as usual. Just be sure to water Miss Lucy's flowers."

"I will, sir."

"An' by the way. You needn't drive into town with that key. I'm goin' to Mr. Benton's myself, an' I'll take it."

"All right."

The boy watched Martin go down the driveway; but at the gate the man wheeled about and shouted back:

"You'll be sure not to forget Miss Lucy's flowers, Tony."

"I'll remember 'em."

"An' if I should have to be away for a while—a week, or a month, or even longer—you'll do the best you can while I'm gone."

"I will, sir."

"That's all. Good night."

With a farewell gesture of his hand Martin passed out of the gate. To have witnessed the buoyancy of his stride, one would have thought him victorious rather than defeated. The truth was, the scent of battle was in his nostrils. For a lifetime he had been the champion of Hate. Now, all the energies of his manhood suddenly awakened, he was going forth to fight in the cause of Love.

CHAPTER XVIII

LOVE TRIUMPHANT

SERENE in spirit, Martin turned into the road, his future plain before him. He would search Lucy out, marry her, and bring her back to her own home. How blind he had been that he should not have seen his path from the beginning! Why, it was the only thing to do, the only possible thing!

There might be, there undoubtedly would be difficulties in tracing his sweetheart's whereabouts, but he did not anticipate encountering any insurmountable obstacle to the undertaking: and should he be balked by circumstance it was always possible to seek assistance from those whose business it was to untangle just such puzzles. Therefore, with head held high, he hastened toward home, formulating his plans as he went along.

With the dawning of to-morrow's sun he must set forth for the western town which, if Tony's testimony was to be trusted, was Lucy's

ultimate destination. It was a pity his fugitive lady had twelve hours' start of him. However, he must overtake her as best he might.

It was unquestionably unfortunate too, that it was such a bad season of the year for him to be absent from home. Harvest time was fast approaching, and he could ill be spared. But of what consequence were crops and the garnering of them when weighed against an issue of such life import as this? To plant and gather was a matter of a year, while all eternity was bound up in his and Lucy's future together.

In consequence, although he realized the probable financial loss that would result from his going on this amorous pilgrimage, the measure of his love was so great that everything else, even the patient toil of months, was as nothing beside it.

It came to him that perhaps, if he confided his present dilemma to his sisters, they might come to his rescue, and in the exigency of sudden frosts save at least a portion of his crops from loss. They were fond of Lucy. Sometimes he had even thought they guessed his secret and were desirous of helping on the romance. At least, he felt sure they would not oppose it, for they had always been eager that

he should marry and leave an heir to inherit the Howe acreage; they had even gone so far as to urge it upon him as his patriotic duty. Moreover, they were very desirous of demolishing the barrier that for so many years had estranged Howe and Webster.

The more he reflected on taking them into his confidence, the more desirable became the idea, and at length he decided that before he went to bed he would have a frank talk with the three women of his household and lay before them all his troubles. If he were to do this he must hasten, for Sefton Falls kept early hours.

When, however, he reached his own land, he found the lights in the house still burning, and he was surprised to see Jane, a shawl thrown over her head, coming to meet him.

"Martin!" she called, "is that you?"

The words contained a disquieting echo of anxiety.

"Yes, what's the matter?"

"Oh, I'm so glad you've got back!" she exclaimed. "I was just goin' over to the Websters' to find you. A telephone message has just come while you've been gone. Lucy——"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Martin breathlessly.

"There's been an accident to the Boston train, an' they telephoned from the hospital at Ashbury that she'd been hurt. They wanted I should come down there!"

She saw Martin reel and put out his hand.

"Martin!" she cried, rushing to his side.

"Is she much hurt? When did the message come?" panted the man.

"Just now," Jane answered. "The doctor said her arm was broken an' that she was pretty well shaken up an' bruised. He didn't send for me so much because she was in a serious condition as because her bag with all her money an' papers was lost, an' she was worryin' herself sick over being without a cent, poor child. He didn't tell her he'd sent for me. He just did it on his own responsibility. Oh, Martin, you will let me go an' bring her back here, won't you? Mary an' 'Liza an' I want to nurse her, ourselves. We can't bear to think of her bein' a charity patient in a hospital."

Jane's voice trembled with earnestness.

"Yes, you shall go, Jane," Martin answered quickly. "We'll both go. I'll see right away if we can get Watford to take us in his

touring car. We ought to make the distance in four hours in a high-power machine."

"Mercy, you're not goin' to-night?"

"I certainly am."

"But there's no need of that," protested Jane. "The doctor said Lucy was gettin' on finely, an' he hoped she'd quiet down an' get some sleep, which was what she needed most."

"But I'd rather go now—right away," Martin asserted.

"'Twould do no good," explained the practical Jane. "We wouldn't get to Ashbury until the middle of the night, an' we couldn't see Lucy. You wouldn't want 'em to wake her up."

"N—o."

"It'll be much wiser to wait till mornin', Martin."

"Perhaps it will."

The brother and sister walked silently across the turf.

"I'm—I'm glad you're willin' we should take care of Lucy," murmured Jane, after an awkward pause. "Mary, 'Liza, an' I love her dearly."

"An' I too, Jane."

The confession came in a whisper. If Mar-

tin expected it to be greeted with surprise, he was disappointed.

Jane did not at first reply; then she said in a soft, happy tone:

"I guessed as much."

"You did."

The man laughed in shame-faced fashion.

"I ain't a bat, Martin."

Again her brother laughed, this time with less embarrassment. It had suddenly become very easy to talk with Jane.

Welcoming her companionship and sympathy, he found himself pouring into her listening ear all his difficulties. He told her of Ellen's will; of the wall; of Lucy's flight; of his love for the girl. How good it was to speak and share his troubles with another!

"How like Lucy to go away!" mused Jane, when the recital was done. "Any self-respectin' woman would have done the same, too. She warn't goin' to hang round here an' make you marry her out of pity."

"But I love her."

"Yes, but how was she to know that?"

"She must have known it."

"You never had told her so."

"N—o, not in so many words."

"Then what right, pray, had she to think so?" argued Jane with warmth. "She warn't the sort of girl to chance it."

"I wish I'd told her before."

"I wish you had," was Jane's brief retort. "You may have trouble now makin' her see you ain't marryin' her 'cause you're sorry for her."

"Sorry for her!"

Jane could not but laugh at the fervor of the exclamation.

"My land! Martin," she said, "I never expected to live to see you so head over ears in love."

"I am."

"I ain't questionin' it," was Jane's dry comment.

When, however, he set foot on the porch, his lover's confidence suddenly deserted him, and he was overwhelmed with shyness.

"You tell Mary an' 'Liza," he pleaded. "Somehow, I can't. Tell 'em about the will an' all. You'll do that much for me, won't you?"

"You know I will."

The words spoke volumes.

"That's right. An' be ready to start for

Ashbury on the mornin' train. We'd better leave here by six, sharp."

"I'll be on hand. Don't worry."

"Good night, Jane."

"Good night."

Still Jane lingered. Then drawing very close to her brother's side, she added bashfully:

"I can't but think, Martin, that instead of puttin' up walls, Ellen Webster's will has broken some of 'em down."

For answer Martin did something he had never done before within the span of his memory; he bent impulsively and kissed his sister's cheek.

Then as if embarrassed by the spontaneity of the deed, he sped upstairs.

In the morning he and Jane started for Ashbury. The day was just waking as they drove along the glittering highway. Heavy dew silvered field and meadow, and the sun, flashing bars of light across the valley, transformed every growing thing into jeweled splendor.

Martin was in high spirits and so was Jane. While the man counted the hours before he would be once more at the side of his beloved, the woman was thinking that whatever changes

the future held in store, she would always have it to remember that in this supreme moment of his life it had been to her that Martin had turned. She had been his confidant and helper. It was worth all that had gone before and all that might come after. There was no need for conversation between them. The reveries of each were satisfying and pregnant with happiness.

Even after they had boarded the train, Jane was quite content to lapse into meditation and enjoy the novelty of the journey. Traveling was not such a commonplace event that it had ceased to be entertaining. She studied her fellow passengers with keenest interest, watched the pictures that framed themselves in the car window, and delighted in a locomotion that proceeded from no effort of her own. It was not often that she was granted the luxury of sitting still.

They reached Ashbury amid a clamor of noontide whistles, and took a cab to the hospital. Here the nurse met them.

"Miss Webster has had her arm set and is resting comfortably," announced the woman. "There is not the slightest cause for alarm. We telephoned merely because she was fret-

ting and becoming feverish, and the doctor feared she would not sleep. The loss of her purse and bank books worried her. We found your address in her coat pocket. She was too dazed and confused to tell who her friends were."

"Is she expectin' us?" inquired Jane.

"No," the nurse answered. "The doctor decided not to tell her, after all, that we had telephoned. For some reason she seemed unwilling for people to know where she was. To be frank, we rather regretted calling you up, when we discovered how she felt about it. But the mischief was done then ——"

"It warn't no mischief," Jane put in with a smile. "It was the best thing that could 'a' happened."

"I'm glad of that."

"Could I see her, do you think?" demanded the visitor presently.

"Yes, indeed. She is much better this morning. Perhaps, however, one caller at a time will be enough; she still has some fever."

"Of course."

Jane turned to Martin; but he shook his head.

"You go," he said.

"I'll do whatever you want me to."

"I'd rather you went first."

"Just as you say. I won't stay long though."

After watching the two women disappear down the long, rubber-carpeted corridor, he began to pace the small, spotlessly neat office in which he had been asked to wait. It was a prim, barren room, heavy with the fumes of iodoform and ether. At intervals, the muffled tread of a doctor or nurse passing through the hall broke its stillness, but otherwise there was not a sound within its walls.

Martin walked back and forth until his solitude became intolerable. There were magazines on the table but he could not read. Would Jane never return? The moments seemed hours.

In his suspense he fell to every sort of pessimistic imagining. Suppose Lucy were worse? Suppose she declined to see him? Suppose she did not love him?

So sanguine had been his hopes, he had not seriously considered the latter possibility. The more he meditated on the thought of failing in his suit, the more wretched became his condition of mind. The torrent of words that he

had come to speak slowly deserted his tongue until when Jane entered, a quarter of an hour later, wreathed in smiles, he was dumb with terror.

"She's ever so much better than I expected to find her," began his sister without preamble. "An' she was so glad to see me, poor soul! You can go up now with the nurse; only don't stay too long."

"Did you tell her ——" began the discomfited Martin.

"I didn't tell her anything," Jane replied, "except that I was going to take her home with me in a day or two."

"Doesn't she know I'm here?"

"No."

"You don't know, then, whether she ——"

"I don't know anything, Martin," Jane replied, nevertheless beaming on him with a radiant smile. "An' if I did I certainly shouldn't tell you. You an' Lucy must settle your affairs yourselves."

With this dubious encouragement and palpitating with uneasiness, Martin was forced to tiptoe out of the room in the wake of his white-robed conductor. As he walked down the long, quiet hall, he said to himself that every

step was bringing him nearer to the crisis when he must speak, and still no words came to his lips. When, however, he turned from the dinginess of the passageway into the sunny little room where Lucy lay, he forgot everything but Lucy herself.

She was resting against the pillows, her hair unbound, and her cheeks flushed to crimson. Never had she looked so beautiful. He stopped on the threshold, awed by the wonder of her maidenhood. Then he heard her voice.

"Martin!"

It was only a single word, but the yearning in it told him all he sought to know. In an instant he was on his knees beside her, kissing the brown hand that rested on the coverlid, touching his lips to the glory of her hair.

Jane, waiting in the meantime alone in the dull, white-washed office, had ample opportunity to study every nail in its floor, count the slats in the slippery, varnished chairs, and speculate as to the identity of the spectacled dignitaries whose portraits adorned the walls.

She planned her winter's wardrobe, decided what Mary, Eliza and herself should wear at the wedding, and mentally arranged every de-

tail of the coming domestic upheaval. Having exhausted all these subjects, she began in quite indecent fashion to select names for her future nieces and nephews. The first boy should be Webster Howe. What a grand old name it would be! She prayed he would be tall like Martin, and have Lucy's eyes and hair. Ah, what a delight she and Mary and Eliza would have bringing up Martin's son and baking cookies for him!

It was just when she was mapping out the educational career of this same Webster Howe and was struggling to decide what college should be honored by his presence that Martin burst into the room. A guilty blush dyed Jane's virgin cheek.

Martin, however, took no notice of her abstraction. In fact he could scarcely speak coherently.

"It's all right, Jane," he cried. "I'm the happiest man on earth. Lucy loves me. Isn't it wonderful, unbelievable? We are goin' to be married right away, an' I'm to start buildin' the wall, so'st it will be done before the cold weather comes. We're goin' to leave a little gate in it for you an' Mary an' 'Liza to come through. An' we're goin' to put up a stone in

the cemetery to Lucy's aunt with: *In grateful remembrance of Ellen Webster* on it."

Jane sniffed.

"I can think of a better inscription than that," she remarked with unwonted tartness, lapsing into Scripture. "Carve on it:

"*He that soweth iniquity shall reap vanity; and the rod of his anger shall fail.*"

Books in their order -

The Wall Between -
Rose o' the Sea -
The Daughter Pays -
The Breathless Moment
The Trumpeter Swan -
Sweet Stranger
The Next Comer -
Kindred of the Dust.
Children of Storm
The Forge of Dreams-come-true.
Paradise Bend -
The Mysterious Rider.
The Purple Heights
The Vagrant Duke -
It Pays to Smile.
Tobias of the Light.
The Portygee
The Scar -
Harriet + The Piper.
The Gray Angels.
The Valley of the Silent Men.
The Top of the World.
Nancy goes to ~~town~~ Town.
Jackie -
The Hermit of Far End -

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